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**Histories of luminous motion : the space, language and light of Jesus Gardea's 'Placeres'.**

Hinchliffe, Dickon

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# Histories of Luminous Motion

The Space, Language and Light of Jesús  
Gardea's *Placeres*

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**Dickon Hinchliffe**

Ph.D.  
Kings College, University of London  
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## Abstract

This thesis analyses the novels and short stories of the contemporary Mexican author Jesús Gardea. Its methods of investigation are drawn from a wide range of academic fields - literature, history, geography, philosophy, anthropology and semiotics. These fields are used interactively in the analysis of Gardea's texts - as cultural studies - rather than as separate disciplines of knowledge. Together they shape the structure of the thesis which is divided into an introduction, five chapters - 'Modernization and Technology', 'Space, Power and Time', 'Language as Death Sentence', 'Light and Perception', 'Death and Spiritual History' - and a conclusion.

The chapters combine textual analysis of Gardea's work with historical, geographical and biographical materials gathered from field trips to Gardea's hometown of Delicias in northern Mexico. These include documents and publications from local libraries, interviews with the author, photographs of the region and studies of local culture, geography and climate in Delicias and the surrounding *llano*.

The thesis contributes to the knowledge of Jesús Gardea's work by breaking from the trend in existing studies and reviews to be almost entirely 'literary' based. It is the first research study to give detailed historical contexts to Gardea's work, through relating the texts firstly to the political projects of the Mexican central State from the Revolution to the 1950s, and secondly to the regional history and culture of Chihuahua. Furthermore, the thesis attempts new readings of Gardea's work, through less conventional methods of analysis. These include studies of spiritual history, light, synaesthesia and 'pre-signifying' communication.

The conclusion discusses some of the problems encountered in the study of Gardea's texts - their unique poetic qualities that elude more orthodox and recognised techniques of literary analysis - and suggests areas for further research.

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## Introduction

We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities...  
Deleuze and Guattari<sup>1</sup>

Designing the structure of this thesis on the work of Jesús Gardea has been as important as developing its ideas and methods of analysis; each has shaped and oriented the other. But what form should this process, this interaction between structure and interpretation, 'form' and 'content', take in relation to Gardea's work?

Convention would perhaps dictate that the separate chapters focus on the 'themes' and 'literary forms' of the author's individual novels and short stories, tracing the development of his writing career over a chronological time scale. But this kind of organizational approach would be insensitive to Gardea's work in a number of ways. Firstly, many of the earlier texts were written simultaneously, preventing analysis of an evolutionary kind. Secondly, it is virtually impossible to isolate, in formal or thematic terms, one of Gardea's texts from another for the purpose of independent analysis. Indeed, to do so would be to bypass the complex interactive relationship of his novels and shorter narratives. The different texts share similar materials and non-sequential structures, narrated in recurring forms of dense poetic language. Actions and events echo and repeat from one text to another, until they become almost interchangeable. In this way, reading Gardea becomes a disorientating experience, with no clearly marked boundaries between the texts, which become an interconnected body, rather than autonomous literary events.



How then to approach this body of work in the form of a doctoral thesis? How can the chapters be arranged in such a way that they give a coherent analysis of the texts, while maintaining a sensitivity to their interactive relationship? Answers to these kinds of question are by no means clear, but what is certain is that they can only be pursued through Gardea's texts themselves. In other words, the design of this thesis takes its shape from the materials it attempts to analyse.

The spatial location of the majority of Gardea's narratives is the fictional town of Placeres, located in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua. Despite its imaginary dimensions, the town is at the heart of Gardea's work, becoming its most powerful organizing force, linking the various novels and stories. The culture of Placeres - its physical dimensions, climate, location, economy and social relations of power - orientates Gardea's texts, from their broad narrative structures to their forms of language and the minutiae of individual events, characters and actions. Indeed, the space of Placeres is so vital and intense in Gardea's fiction that all other places become anonymous, the author referring to them simply as *pueblos*, *caseríos*, or *ciudades*.

In an attempt to reflect this vitality, the thesis gives Placeres a similar position within its structure. The town becomes a map for the various chapters, which approach diverse cultural aspects of Placeres - its geography, history, language, social behaviour - through different forms of cultural analysis. But to enter the imagined space of Placeres and engage in its complexities as a cultural site, involves certain risks. The town is not open, for example, to access through certain conventional forms of intellectual analysis, as it offers no dates as chronological markers, no political history and no clear literary references on which to base a reading. This does not mean that Placeres exists outside Mexican history, rather that the links to it are complex and often implicit, and require more subtle approaches that do not rely upon standard points of cultural reference.

In response, the thesis attempts a more fluid approach that communicates across and between traditional boundaries of academic discipline - history, literary studies and anthropology being the main disciplines involved. It aims to bring diverse cultural

processes into play with Placeres, without isolating them into separate and distinct fields of theoretical analysis. For example, chapter one begins with an exploration of the relationship in Gardea's work between the fictional Placeres and the place that influenced its creation, Ciudad Delicias in central Chihuahua. The analysis centres around a discussion of the national political and historical forces behind the construction of Delicias in the 1930s and how these forces are at work in Placeres. This kind of research requires the elucidation and interconnection of different cultural processes - political, economic, historical, geographic and literary. The chapter then shifts from the broad concerns of the nation-state to more intimate, local histories of Placeres - the spiritual beliefs and socio-cultural traditions of its population. Here, the cultural processes outlined above intersect with anthropological and regional historical materials, becoming interdependent, rather than isolated phenomena. In the subsequent chapters, this interactive pattern extends both into other acknowledged fields of analysis - sociology, linguistics, philosophy, phenomenology, psychohistory, semiotics - and into those that have no recognised name, such as the discussions of light in chapter four and 'pre-signifying' communication in chapter three. (This process is examined in more detail below, in the outline of the five chapters.)

By combining and mixing traditionally independent academic fields and other modes of analysis in this way, Placeres can be explored with greater freedom, and as a result multiple histories of the town begin to emerge. Together, they generate the culture of Placeres, defying Alice Reckley's claim that the town is 'bereft of its past' and exists outside history as an autonomous literary site.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Reckley's attempt to isolate Gardea's texts from history and local culture is commonplace amongst reviews and articles on his work. The danger of such an approach is that it leaves a cultural and historical vacuum around Placeres, which critics tend to fill with analysis of what they perceive to be the 'universal' themes of Gardea's texts - 'solitude', 'loss', 'despair', 'death' - and how they are represented through metaphors, symbols, motifs and 'universal' (i.e. Greco-Roman) myths. This process neglects the complex range of histories that have influenced Gardea's creation of Placeres and that this thesis attempts to



address - regional traditions and beliefs, and the broader socio-political dynamics of Mexico as a nation-state since the Revolution. Similarly, the landscape and climate of Placeres are given 'universal' symbolic meanings. José Manuel García-García describes Gardea's work as 'una expolición de tropos y figuras de símbolos básicos: el calor y el sol pueden ser castigo, infierno, soledad, culpabilidad, desesperanza.'<sup>3</sup> Along the same reductive lines, Alfredo Espinoza Aguirre states: 'El sol funciona para Gardea como arquetipo. Es fuente de energía, símbolo de vida. En cambio la noche es la boca del misterio...'<sup>4</sup> Chapter two of this thesis, 'Space, Power and Time' and chapter four 'Light and Perception', offer radically different approaches to this standardization of the geography of Placeres. Rather than constructing 'universal' metaphoric meanings out of the landscape of Placeres, they aim to recognise its unique non-symbolic qualities that require new and more open forms of analysis.

If Placeres becomes like a map for the thesis, its relationship with the town that influenced its creation - Ciudad Delicias, located in the central plains of Chihuahua - is at the heart of much of the research, particularly the opening chapters. While many of the studies and reviews of Gardea's texts to date cite the importance of Delicias as Gardea's place of birth (1939), they tend to limit the field of enquiry to biographical details, glossing over the wider question of its influence on the development of Placeres. This is somewhat surprising, given that so many aspects of Placeres are clearly modelled on Delicias: they share a similar landscape and climate, patterns of social behaviour and economic exchange, history, language and names.

This study attempts to engage in this wider field of enquiry, through an analysis of the history of Delicias, built by the Mexican central government in 1933, and its effect upon Gardea's creation of Placeres. It argues that through Gardea's memories of life in the new town in the 1940s and 1950s - growing up in a spatiotemporal zone created at the intersection of the State's desire for modern 'progress' and the local social practices and spiritual beliefs of its rural immigrant population - he transmutes its history and culture to the fictional site of Placeres. This metamorphic process - the transposition of historical

and cultural experiences through memory and imagination - generates a complex and diverse set of interactive relationships, that are vital to the research. They operate between fields of memory, history and literature; the 'real' and the 'imaginary'; the author and the State; regional and national cultures.

While clear linkages can be made between the two towns in the opening chapters of this thesis, what is perhaps more important to the subsequent sections is the way in which Gardea imagines Placeres as an alternative vision - or recording - of life in central Chihuahua in the mid 20th century. It becomes an unorthodox history, that resists more 'official' accounts of Delicias - economic reports and industrial data, State funded regional historiography and local *Rotary Club* publications - which comprise the bulk of printed material on the history of the town. In this way, Placeres becomes a site that is simultaneously familiar - it has clear socio-historical and geophysical connections with Delicias - and new and unrecognizable - it is not controlled by traditional forms of historiographical representation.

This kind of relationship between the familiar and the unknown pervades Placeres. Taking simple objects, mundane routines and 'everyday' sensory experiences, Gardea transforms them into unfamiliar and dangerous perceptual events. Often the reader is unaware of what is occurring, the changes taking place through slow shifts of time, space, light, language and physical dimensions. The movement is both unpredictable and disturbing, with the capacity to penetrate and alter the perceptions of characters and readers. In this way, Placeres transcends Delicias, becoming a poetic site that seems to float somewhere between conscious recognition and unfamiliar territories. The combination is simultaneously mesmeric and disconcerting.

Before giving a brief outline of each chapter, it should be stressed that while the thesis draws upon a broad spectrum of research materials and theories from different disciplines, it is only when these theories and materials intersect with each other, that they can begin to approach the cultural complexities of Gardea's fiction. This interaction occurs both within the individual chapters and between them. At the same time however,



Gardea's texts demand approaches that go beyond this interplay, to areas of memory and imagination that are not accessible to familiar methods of academic critique, for example the discussions of 'presignifying' forms of communication in chapter three, light in chapter four and soul beliefs in chapter five.

Chapter one, 'Modernization and Technology', begins with an analysis of the central State's modernizing agenda in rural Chihuahua, specifically its construction of Delicias around a vast irrigation system and hydroelectric dams. In its construction, the town became a symbol of the central government's desire to draw Chihuahua - and other 'peripheral' northern states - into the national body, under the broad philosophy of modern 'progress'. It continues by relating this history to Gardea's Placeres, before linking it to the wider experience of new technologies - the boom in manufactured goods and domestic appliances, that occurred throughout Mexico in the 1940s and 1950s. Through the penetration of these technologies into the rural isolation of Placeres, the chapter suggests that while the political will - the modernising project of the Mexican government - is not explicitly referred to in the town, its presence and power are instrumental to the cultural life of its inhabitants. The chapter continues by analysing the ways in which modern technologies and machines are perceived in the *cotidiano*, that is how they mix and interact with existing technologies and regional cultural traditions, generating forms of 'cultural hybridity' in the daily life of the characters. This transcultural experience is explored through the short story 'Vámonos ya', from the collection *De alba sombría*, in which a supernatural figure of Mexican popular religion - *la Muerte* - appropriates a modern automobile as her means of transport. As discussed above, the chapter aims to draw out different histories of Placeres - State/official and regional/spiritual - through setting in motion the interaction of different analytical disciplines - history, politics and anthropology - in the poetic context of Gardea's texts.

Chapter two, 'Space, Power and Time', examines the spatial histories of Delicias and Placeres. The research moves across and between orthodox disciplines, from geography and urban planning, into cultural geography - the complex politics of space behind the construction of Delicias, and how Placeres relates to it. It analyses the invention of two

sites - the 'concrete' and the 'fictional' - contrasting the spatiotemporal politics of Blake the urban planner and his emphasis on linear perspective and chronometric time, with Gardea's disintegration of these kinds of geometric and temporal order. It continues by exploring the ways in which Gardea frees Placeres - and in the process Delicias - from the techniques of spatial control applied by the planners. This is discussed in the way Gardea shapes the visual dimensions of Placeres around uncontrollable non-human forces of the surrounding *llano* - light, air and dust - rather than the 'concrete', linear, architectural structures of the town. This action is then linked to Gardea's constant undermining of the rigid efficiency of 'public' (national/historical) time - symbolised by the town's central clock tower - with the multiple temporalities of the inhabitants of Placeres' lives. Throughout, the chapter attempts to subvert conventional distinctions between 'historical' and 'fictional' events - the inventions of Delicias and Placeres - and to contend that both occur through actions of the imagination that defy these academic labels.

Chapter three, 'Language as Death Sentence', shifts the thesis from historical and geographic perspectives to a linguistic analysis of Gardea's texts. It begins by highlighting the inadequacies of structural linguistics as a methodological approach to communication in Placeres, concluding that Saussure's systemic language 'universals' are passive intellectual concepts, detached from the wider cultural field. The chapter gives alternative approaches, through the theories of Elias Canetti and Deleuze and Guattari, suggesting that language - more accurately, language events - in Placeres are inseparable from the power relations of speakers and interlocutors, and the social context of their utterances. The study continues with an analysis of the transcultural nature of Gardea's language, proposing that his texts are a complex assemblage of words, phrases and modes of communication specific to the locale of central Chihuahua, combined with forms of poetic, non-sequential narrative technique inherited from US and Latin American modernists. This is followed by a broader analysis of communication, stressing the effect of non-verbal and 'presignifying' forms of communication in Placeres - non-articulate sounds, the cries of the dead - that defy the logic of conventional forms



of language analysis. Here, the emphasis shifts from the discipline of linguistics to other approaches to 'communication', many of them unique to Placeres, that cannot be confined within standard areas of language analysis, or literary studies.

Chapter four, 'Light and Perception: Histories of Luminous Motion', addresses human perception through the unique intensities of light in Placeres. It attempts to explore light through different contexts - European philosophy, Mexican history, Chihuahuan geography, semiotics, phenomenology and neurology. It begins with a brief history of the philosophy of light in the western world, from Christianity through the Enlightenment to Phenomenology - specifically the entrenched use of light as a metaphor of revelation, knowledge and human consciousness - concluding that Gardea makes a radical break from this reductive tradition. It continues with an analysis of Gardea's work in relation to Henri Bergson's theory of the *movement-image* : things are luminous by themselves without any consciousness illuminating them. This is complicated by relating the light of Placeres to Mexican histories of light, specifically *Nahua* myths of the sun gods, their violence and need for human sacrifice to sustain their power. Shifting to a geographic context, the chapter addresses Gardea's claim that the light of Placeres is a reflection of the luminescence of Ciudad Juárez, his place of residence. He contends that the light of Juárez is the most intense in Latin America. The discussion then moves to human perception, from Jaques Lacan's theory of 'the Gaze'<sup>5</sup>, to a comparison between Gardea and William Faulkner - 'literature's greatest luminist'.<sup>6</sup> This is followed by an exploration of *synaesthesia* - the interplay and confusion of the different human senses by the brain - that appears throughout Gardea's work, and an analysis of light's relationship with language and semiotics. While the chapter combines diverse analytical fields to give different cultural and perceptual contexts to the light of Placeres, it suggests throughout that this light cannot be reduced to a 'reading', as its power is largely non-symbolic and non-signifying.

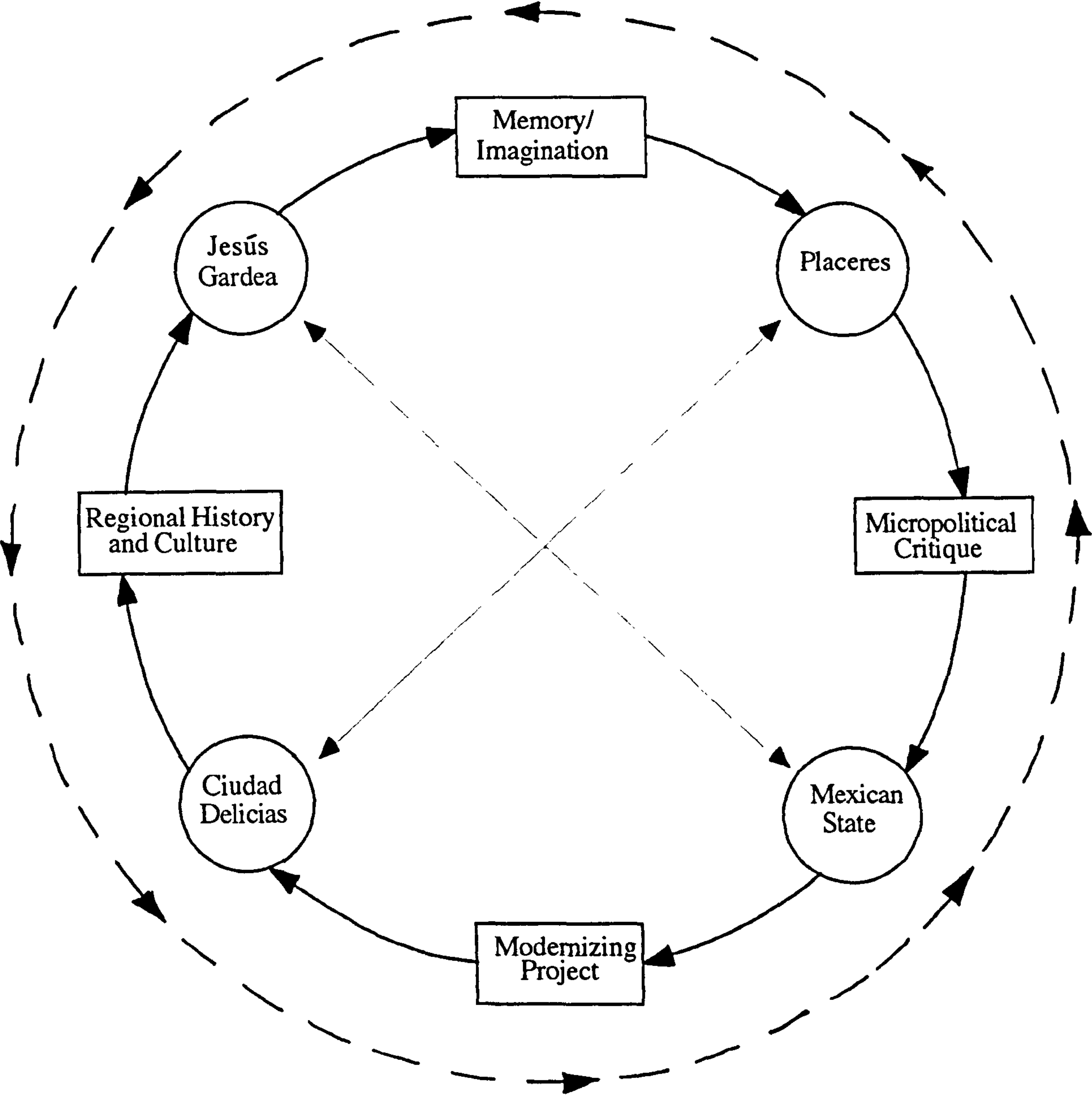
Chapter five, 'Death and Spiritual History', complicates the earlier chapters' analysis of the 'official' (State) history of Delicias, with spiritual histories of the region. It begins by revealing the subtle interplay between folklore and popular religion in Chihuahua and

Gardea's work. It continues with an analysis of the way in which Gardea ruptures the conceptual gap between the living and the dead, in the novel *El tornavoz*. Placeres<sup>4v</sup> becomes an interworld that hovers in a liminal state - at a threshold between worlds - where the inhabitants of the town, 'alive' and 'dead' coexist. They mix and interact in this zone with such intensity, that it becomes virtually impossible to distinguish between them. In this way, a multitude of accepted dualisms are ruptured - body and spirit, matter and space, the sensory and the intelligent etc. Similarly, the conventions on which historiography are traditionally based - what Henry Corbin calls 'the cult of fact' - are weakened. The chapter continues with a comparison of Placeres to Juan Rulfo's imaginary *pueblo* Comala, suggesting, contrary to the literary critics, that they occupy radically different positions in relation to Mexican spiritual culture. It concludes with a contrast between the spiritual activity of Placeres - its spontaneity, danger and freedom from religious and mythic paradigms - and the carefully planned ritual protocols that are common to both Mexican popular religion and Catholicism, and European legends and fairy tales (including the Freudian unconscious.)

As a body of work, the various chapters of the thesis are not intended to function as isolated and static blocks of research, but a moving network of linkages and connections, that flow between diverse cultural fields. As the interplay develops and the chapters connect, the movement and passages can be drawn as a map - a diagram of forces:



Diagram of the thesis.



The diagram gives a simple visual representation of the relationships between memory, history and literature described above - between the 'real' and the 'imaginary', the author and the State, regional and national cultures. While the circles contain both the State and the author, and the 'concrete' and 'fictional' towns, the rectangles show some of the processes - political, imaginary, historical - through which they interact. The arrows and lines suggest the routes of transmission that these processes may take and how they link Gardea and Placeres to Mexico's central government's national modernising agenda. The outer ring signifies the reverse shift and multiple movements within the diagram's relationships of force, that never function in simple one way lines of power.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Delicias can be 'read' through Placeres as much as Placeres can be 'read' through Delicias.

### Literary Contexts

Gardea's work does not rest easily within the canon of contemporary Mexican literature. He lives in Ciudad Juárez, on the US border, over one thousand miles from the literary machine of the capital city - its international best-selling authors, publishing houses, magazines, universities and mass media. But the geographic gulf is small compared to the gap between Gardea's attitude towards writing and the methods of what he calls the 'career writers' of México D.F., whose work is dominated by 'professional' literary practices - networking, securing publishing advances, making public appearances to promote sales and author profile, incestuous references to the capital's key literary figures, following literary fashions and writing for the demands of the current market. Gardea is particularly critical of the capital's cultural elite; the hegemonic power of Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes and their competing literary empires.

There is also a political dimension to the actions of the 'career writers' - an interdependency between intellectuals and the central State. As García Canclini states, in

some Latin American countries (most notably, Mexico) intellectuals have a tendency to 'try to play a political role in respect to national culture, through official channels...'. In the process, their work becomes 'vindicated by the majority party', in a mutually beneficial relationship of politics and intellectual culture.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Gardea has consistently maintained a critical stance against national literary institutions and their links with central government. This perhaps goes some way to explaining the significant lack of reviews and critical coverage of his work in both academic journals and the mass media, a form of low intensity censorship that prevents his novels and stories from reaching a wider readership.

For the professional intelligentsia of Mexico City, Gardea's writing is widely regarded as either irrelevant - it makes no reference to the capital and is set in an unknown rural location at an unspecified time - or a poor imitation of the institutionally revered Juan Rulfo, a criticism this thesis will address. Furthermore, Gardea's novels are considered inaccessible. This judgement can be attributed to two factors: firstly, the poetics of his work break with the conventions of narrative tradition, demanding repeat readings and intense reader participation, and, at the same time, they do not adhere to the 'post-modern' stylistic writing techniques in vogue in the literary market of the 1990s. Secondly, Gardea's texts pose a daunting task to journalists and academics who attempt to analyse and label them in relation to widely recognised patterns in Mexican literary history. For example, there is no sense of nationalism or *la patria* in Gardea's work. But neither are they regional texts in the conventional sense - they do not set up a romantic polemic between celebrated local cultural traditions and the ideologies of the central State. Indeed, in his work local communities and the family unit - traditional vehicles of defiance against official State culture in Mexican fiction - are fragile and divided, dominated by internal rivalries, gossip, feuds and murder. In *El diablo en el ojo*, there are no references to family groups and the community is built on suspicion and fear. In *El tornavoz*, the Paniagua family is torn apart when the men are possessed by dead spirits, while the rest of the community are like strangers - 'Parecían todos fuereños... Caídos del cielo.' (p.35)



Even in Chihuahua, Gardea is relatively unknown. He has never been part of a contemporary literary movement or group of writers in Ciudad Juárez and has always written in isolation from his contemporaries. Instead of the standard arts-based academic background of most Mexican authors, he studied dentistry, which he practised for a number of years before turning to writing. In this way, he has perhaps lacked the support system offered by intellectual institutions to academics who write fiction. Even now, he rarely takes up the numerous invitations he receives to speak at universities throughout ~~the~~ Mexico and Latin America.

Despite living on the US-Mexican border, within two kilometres of El Paso, Gardea has never learned English and rarely crosses the frontier into Texas. This is perhaps surprising, given that he claims it was reading US authors, many of them from the southern states - Faulkner, William Carlos Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Pasos - that first influenced him to become a writer. Between 1961 and 1966, while he studied orthodontics in Guadalajara, Gardea read American fiction with great intensity:

Iba a la biblioteca del Consulado Americano. Claro, leí novelistas gringos, ensayistas gringos, filósofos gringos, teatro gringo...En fin: lo que tenía a la mano...Durante cuatro años pude leer a mis anchas. Me encerraba en mi cuarto y esto era leer...<sup>9</sup>

From Latin America, Gardea cites José Lezama Lima, Juan Carlos Onetti and José María Arguedas as the authors that have had the greatest impact on his work, and from Mexico, Juan Rulfo and José Revueltas. Unfortunately, the majority of media critics have focused on what they perceive to be the parallels between Gardea and Rulfo, ignoring the vastly different socio-historical and geographical contexts of the worlds of Placeres and Comala. In comparisons between Revueltas and Gardea, the former's Marxist and Christian beliefs are brushed aside in the desire to fuse the elusive Gardea to the Mexican



literary establishment. In the process, the ways in which Gardea's works are a unique and unprecedented phenomena in Mexico's literary tradition are by-passed.

As a reader, Gardea prefers books on art - painting, architecture and sculpture - to studies of literature and literary theory, which unlike most authors he has consistently shunned:

Rehuyo todo lo que sea teoría sobre la narrativa o sobre la novela. Incluso casi no leo revistas literarias.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to his counterparts in Mexico City, he is similarly uninterested in studies and reviews of his own work, yet enjoys being interviewed in his home town and offers hospitality and assistance to those that seek to do so.

On the contemporary Mexican scene, literary critics have increasingly linked Gardea to other northern writers, assembling them into a group known as 'Los narradores del desierto'<sup>11</sup>. The group's key members are Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo (Nuevo Leon, 1950), Daniel Sada (Baja California, 1953) and Gerardo Comejo (Sonora, 1937). The classification is made and the literary movement instituted within the history of Mexican fiction, through similarities that can be perceived between the authors and their work. For example: they are among the relatively few writers to have emerged from the northern states since the late 1970s. (The Sonoran poet Rubén C. Navarro is another.) They locate their fiction in the vast, desolate spaces - deserts, plains and sierras - of their native states. Their characters tend to live in isolated and impoverished rural *pueblos* scattered across these landscapes, where life is dominated by the hostile extremities of climate and geography. The *pueblos*, in spite of their geopolitical isolation, experience varying degrees of cultural transformation under the impact of national modernization and social change in the middle to late 20th century. Furthermore, as 'provincial' writers, they have had similar experiences of Mexico's cultural centralism - being ostracised as 'peripheral' northerners and given secondary status in national literature to the multitude of writers based in México D.F., a city Gerardo Comejo refers to as 'pena capital'.<sup>12</sup>

Map of Mexico: Chihuahua and the northern states.



However, this attempt to name and institute a literary movement is limited and misleading. While the similarities made between Gardea and his contemporaries have some validity, on closer analysis they become increasingly superficial. When I questioned Gardea on the subject, he expressed vehement dislike at being branded a 'desert' writer, with all the images this conjures up, contending that his fiction is located in the *llano*, a quite different spatial landscape. Indeed, throughout his work there is no mention of the *desert*, in contrast for example to Ricardo Elizondo, whose fiction is largely situated in 'un rincón aislado del inmenso desierto...', somewhere in the north eastern state of Nuevo Leon.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the differences between Gardea and the other so-called 'desert writers', in cultural, stylistic and historical terms, are profound. Just as the *llanos* of Chihuahua are distinct from the landscape of Juan Rulfo's Jalisco, they are also quite different - not just geographically but in the form of the social arrangements of the *pueblos* and the historical experiences of their inhabitants - from the sierras of Sonora to the west, and the deserts of Coahuila and Nuevo Leon to the east.

The 'common themes' of the 'desert movement', alluded to by the critics, become disparate and heterogeneous when subjected to simple comparative analysis. In Gerardo Comejo's most famous work *La sierra y el viento*, the collapse of the mining industry in a small town forces its inhabitants to embark upon a journey into the desert, to seek a new, more prosperous life. The migration becomes a mission to populate the inhospitable landscape, introducing human technology and 'civilisation' to the Sonoran sierra. This kind of journey, with its mythic overtones is radically different to the events of Gardea's narratives. In contrast to Comejo's quest to people the sierra and 'civilise' it, the population of Placeres in *La canción de las mulas muertas* is static and slowly declining through illness and murder. The town's social institutions simultaneously collapse and its buildings become eroded by the heat, wind and dust of the *llano*, the 'civilised' space of the polis eventually subsumed by the surrounding plains. Furthermore, while Comejo's characters function for the good of the wider community, in Placeres communal life is destroyed by the abuse of power by local bosses, individual



acts of vengeance, debt culture and violent feuds. Finally, a powerful work ethic exists in Cornejo's community, in the willingness of its members to labour and build for the future, while the inhabitants of Placeres spend most of their time drinking, gambling and gossiping in bars and cafes, or simply passing the day sheltering from the heat of the sun.

In terms of 'style', Gardea's writing techniques are quite distinct from his peers. Ricardo Elizondo's texts display an almost obsessive use of signs and symbolic motifs, that combine with a heightened rhetorical tone, designed to produce a mythic, epic quality in his narratives of 'small town', daily life, quite alien to Gardea's writing. The use of symbols and myths in this way is part of Elizondo's inherent mimesis of Gabriel García Márquez' texts - a process that he himself admits - that gives a sense in his work of an author still searching for a voice. Or even, that he is writing to the prescribed conventions of 'magical realism', upheld by literary institutions, to secure critical acclaim and a place in the expanding commercial market of Mexican fiction. Gardea's texts, on the other hand, have no such mimetic function, and he dismisses *realismo mágico* as the world-wide media's appropriation of Alejo Carpentier's term 'lo real maravilloso', to aid the categorization and homogenization of Latin American literature.<sup>14</sup>

Daniel Sada writes with a formalist, linguistic rigour that verges on the mathematic. In the novel *Albedrío*, he combines this with the romantic traditions of the Spanish picaresque novel. In contrast to this style and to Elizondo's obsessive use of symbols and metaphors, Gardea states - 'No tengo ningún andamiaje teórico.'<sup>15</sup> Instead, he writes from sensual and unconscious drives:

Alberto Moravía dijo una cosa que me cae como anillo al dedo: 'Escribe por oído'. O sea: según como me suena. Incluso nunca sé qué voy a escribir. No tengo un plan previo...Muchas veces parto simplemente de la primera palabra que me viene a la cabeza y de ahí tengo que desarrollar toda la historia. Prefiero funcionar a estos niveles inconsciente.<sup>16</sup>

Placing Gardea within a literary context serves more to highlight his unique position in Mexican literature than to alloy him to a national literary pattern, body or code of practice. This does not imply that his work exists outside the frame of Mexican culture, far from it. Rather, that his literary influences are diverse and that instead of being caught up in the practices and concerns of a 'career writer', or spearheading a literary movement in a way that would bring widespread critical acclaim, his texts and ideas are, as Merleau-Ponty would put it, open to the wider 'field of nature and culture which they must express.'<sup>17</sup>

### Research Methods and Materials

In addition to my research in the libraries and academic institutions of the UK, I spent several months in Mexico, collating literary and historical materials located at the libraries of La Universidad de México and UNAM in the capital city. I obtained critical essays and reviews of Gardea's work and various social, historical and geographic studies and reports unavailable in the UK of the *los Conchos* region, the locale of Delicias. Travelling north to Chihuahua I visited Gardea in Ciudad Juárez, on the Mexican-US border where I conducted several hours of interview over a number of days, before travelling south to Ciudad Delicias in central Chihuahua.

In Delicias, I gathered more historical and cultural documentation from its small library, including the publications of the local Rotary Club, that contain materials from the 1930s-1950s - photographs of the construction of the town and its early institutions, maps and interviews with its planners - that were vital in particular to the research of chapter two on space and power. I took my own photographs of the town - its people, bars, shops, architecture and light - and spent several days in the surrounding *llano*, experiencing its spatial qualities; the landscape, climate, sounds, speeds and times, to enable a more sensitive sensory response to the spatiotemporal dynamics of Gardea's work. Returning to the UK, I have maintained contact with the author, who has continued to respond to my questions and enquiries by letter.



## Notes

1. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.4.
2. Alice Reckley, 'Desire's Intransitive Dimension in Jesús Gardea's *El tornavoz*' p.573.
3. José Manuel García-García, 'La geografía textual de Placeres', p.56.
4. Alfredo Espinoza Aguirre, 'Placeres: El sofocado infierno de Jesús Gardea', p.23.
5. Jaques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*.
6. Deleuze, *Foucault*, p.81.
7. Among the limitations of the diagram are its two dimensional nature and visual stasis. The positions of the components are not representative of the constant movements and flows at work in Gardea's texts.
8. Néstor García Canclini, interviewed by Patrick D. Murphy in 'Contrasting Perspectives: Cultural Studies in Latin America and the United States: a Conversation with Néstor García Canclini'.
9. Interview with Sergio Cordero, 'Fundo espiritualmente a Delicias'.
10. Cordero.
11. Vicente Francisco Torres, *Esta Narrativa Mexicana: Ensayos y entrevistas*, p.73. In *Antología de la narrativa mexicana del siglo XX*, Christopher Domínguez Michael groups these authors with Gardea in a similar way, in the section of his anthology entitled 'Tierra Baldía', p.520.
12. Gerardo Cornejo, interviewed by Vicente Francisco Torres in *Esta Narrativa Mexicana*, p.80.
13. Ricardo Elizondo, 'La Botella verde', from the short story collection *Relatos de mar, desierto y muerte*, p.29.
14. In spite of this, many critics continue to use the term marvellous realism to describe Gardea's work, for example José Manuel García-García refers to Placeres as 'un mundo realmaravilloso de milagros...', p.56.
15. Cordero.
16. Cordero.
17. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p.21.



## ONE

# Modernization and Technology

### Ciudad Delicias: the Mechanical Oasis

The spatial location for much of Jesús Gardea's work is the fictional town Placeres. Although an imaginary space, the town's geography, culture and society is shaped by Gardea's childhood memories of life in Ciudad Delicias, central Chihuahua, in the 1940s and 1950s. Delicias was built by the Mexican State in 1933 as a geopolitical component of its modernization programme in the years of post-revolutionary political instability. The aim was to convert the 'barren wilderness' of the northern plains into a mechanised agrarian colony - an agroindustrial model for the regeneration of the Mexican economy. In the process, the new town became a geophysical reflection of State politics and desire, its history closely aligned to the social and economic agenda of Mexico's central government.

While Placeres reflects the geography, socio-economic relationships and cultural traditions of Ciudad Delicias, it is not an explicit historical chronicle of Delicias, but a creation of Gardea's memory and imagination. Thus, the Mexican State's political agenda for national modernization behind the construction of Delicias is not directly referred to in Placeres. Rather, the State enters Placeres through more subtle routes and channels - through agents and forces of modernization in the form of new technologies and products. As they penetrate the daily lives of the town's inhabitants, these forces intersect with pre-existing local traditions - social, economic, spiritual - resulting in complex and volatile cultural interactions. These interactions do not comply with a

process of *acculturation* - the domination and substitution of the 'old' by the 'new'. They generate mixed cultural forms, and a sense of modernity in the town as the experience of a 'heterogeneidad multitemporal', to use García Canclini's term.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will attempt to explore the relationship between Placeres and Ciudad Delicias through this experience of multitemporality. It will begin by outlining the national political dynamic behind the building of Ciudad Delicias - the modernization projects - before examining how this history interacted with the cultural practices and beliefs of rural Chihuahua, and how Gardea transmits the intensities of this interaction through his imagination, to produce the unique cultural and literary site of Placeres.

In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, the presidency of Alvaro Obregón (1920-24) faced a national economic crisis. The decade of civil war and political instability had reduced agricultural production to a critical level, yet Mexico's socio-economic structure and its development as a 'modern' nation-state were entirely dependent on it - agriculture still far outweighed industrial and manufacturing output at this time.<sup>2</sup> Responding to the crisis, the Sonoran born Obregón and his government turned to their native northern states, where they envisaged unprecedented agroindustrial growth across the vast sierras and valleys, that would become the model for national development. In Chihuahua however - arguably the most violent state of the revolutionary period - the booming agricultural production of the region previously controlled by the Terrazas oligarchy in the Porfiriato era had collapsed. The agricultural work force - labourers and *rancheros* - had been geographically dispersed or killed; there was widespread rustling and slaughter of livestock; the fields had been plundered by armies or left untended. To regenerate the region and fulfil the vision of a northern agroindustrial revolution, Obregón and his successor Plutarco Elías Calles turned to the US example, positing technology as the key to greater levels of agricultural output and efficiency.

On the macro scale this was translated into a comprehensive irrigation programme, inaugurated in 1926 with the *Ley de irrigación* and managed by the *Comisión Nacional de Irrigación*. The extensive, but largely uncolonized and unproductive plains of



northern Mexico offered the field for the programme's implementation, while US designed dams, irrigation systems and pumping equipment provided the technology to achieve its modernising and developmental goals. Yet it was not until 1933 that the new town of Delicias and the vast dam and irrigation system - *Riego 05* - were constructed in the heart of the semi-arid *llano* of central Chihuahua. The event marked the apex of the *Callista* agroindustrial dream. City and water system were built in tandem - the polis would house the labour force that would operate the irrigation channels and farm the land, while *Riego 05* would bring fertility to over 60,000 hectares of land that was previously barren and unpopulated *llano*.<sup>3</sup> Located in the region of the Río Conchos, Delicias and *Riego 05* became the legacy of Calles's desire for a 'programa permanente de modernización del campo mexicano...'<sup>4</sup>

Aboites Aguilar, one of the few historians to investigate the irrigation programme, refers to it as 'la irrigación revolucionaria'. This term suggests a double sense of revolution. Firstly, it posits the programme as a consequence of the socio-political upheaval that occurred from 1910 to the 1920s in Mexico. Secondly, it recognises the radical - 'revolutionary' - transformation of the means of agricultural production that began in the 1920s, which would have socio-economic repercussions across the nation. In the construction of large dam and water systems, the Mexican State became involved in a process Marx describes as:

constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.<sup>5</sup>

Yet for the *Callistas*, there was an arrogant confidence that irrigation and revolution - in the sense of the Mexican Revolution - were synonymous. Together they carried the banners of 'progress' and modernization that were assumed to be for the mutual benefit of Mexican society, from the rural peasantry to the urban business classes, an attitude characteristic of the PRI to this day. Instead, the concepts of irrigation and revolution became increasingly self-contradictory.



A celebration of the 25th anniversary of Ciudad Delicias by a local cotton producer. The illustration portrays the city as a new and 'progressive' model of agroindustrial productivity. It combines symbols of modern manufacturing with the 'natural' power of the sun and an icon of Anglo-Saxon strength and beauty.





The irrigation programme was inextricably linked to a political agenda. Behind the rhetoric for agricultural development in the north lay a complex assemblage of the hegemonic desires of the post-revolutionary State. With the continuing threat of civil war, and further *agrarista* uprisings, the 'fortalecimiento y consolidación del Estado mexicano contemporáneo' was crucial to the survival of the Obregón and Calles administrations.<sup>6</sup> Delicias was politically induced as part of this desire for State building and national integration - 'el ritmo de la transformación agraria, su modernización o su radicalismo, debía aparecer como política estatal, como política agraria'.<sup>7</sup> Chihuahua became drawn into the national space for the first time, becoming the locus for the politics of the central State through economic investment.

Designed for political stability, the irrigation programme was a political translation of the masses' demands for agrarian reform. Rather than radical social and agrarian reform along the lines of the *agraristas'* demands, *irrigación revolucionaria* was initiated to bring agricultural change in conjunction with a wider project for Mexico, based upon the capitalist paradigm. This project effected a gradual transformation of the agrarian panorama along liberal lines. It promoted the small land holder, *la pequeña propiedad*, rather than the *ejido* system favoured by the *agraristas*, with its emphasis on communal ownership:

La irrigación revolucionaria, con su insistencia en impulsar un cambio gradual y moderado del panorama agrario y su confianza en las virtudes transformadoras de la inversión pública, era de hecho la otra cara de la abierta animadversión de estos norteros poderosos por los ejidos, las comunidades indígenas, y todo aquello alejado de la propiedad privada, de los espíritus emprendedores y, en fin, del liberalismo que tanto permeó el levantamiento revolucionario en el norte del país.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, and in direct contravention of the peasantry's demands in the Revolution, the government revived the socio-economic structure of the *hacienda*. *Haciendas* were politically encouraged to recover their dominant role in the agricultural production of the region, thus pacifying the big land owners and ranchers. Indeed,

*latifundios* benefited most from the irrigation programmes, their properties becoming powerful centres of agroindustry. This paradoxical liberal combination of the *latifundia* model and the *pequeña propiedad* instigated by *Riego 05*, undermined both the *ejidos* set up by revolutionary groups and the more traditional peasant livelihoods of the *trabajadores agrícolas*.

Furthermore, the allocation of irrigated land and the concurrent credit systems run by the government's *Banco Nacional de Credito Agricola* to help migrants purchase the land, were based on an elite selection process, forcing the majority of *colonos* into the casual labour market. By 1938, the disparity brought by *Riego 05* and the corruption of government appointed officials that managed it, reached a head. In the *Manifiesto del Sindicato de Trabajadores Bancarios, Sección Delicias, Ante el cambio de gerente del distrito de Riego*, the writers claim that the management of *Riego 05* was, 'en los manos de un agente de los intereses fascistas de un reducido grupo privilegiado.'<sup>9</sup> Some of the migrants were simply excluded from the credit system on the basis of their financial situation, while those that did receive help but could no longer afford to meet repayments, had the water supply in the irrigation channels of their fields cut off by *Riego 05* officials.

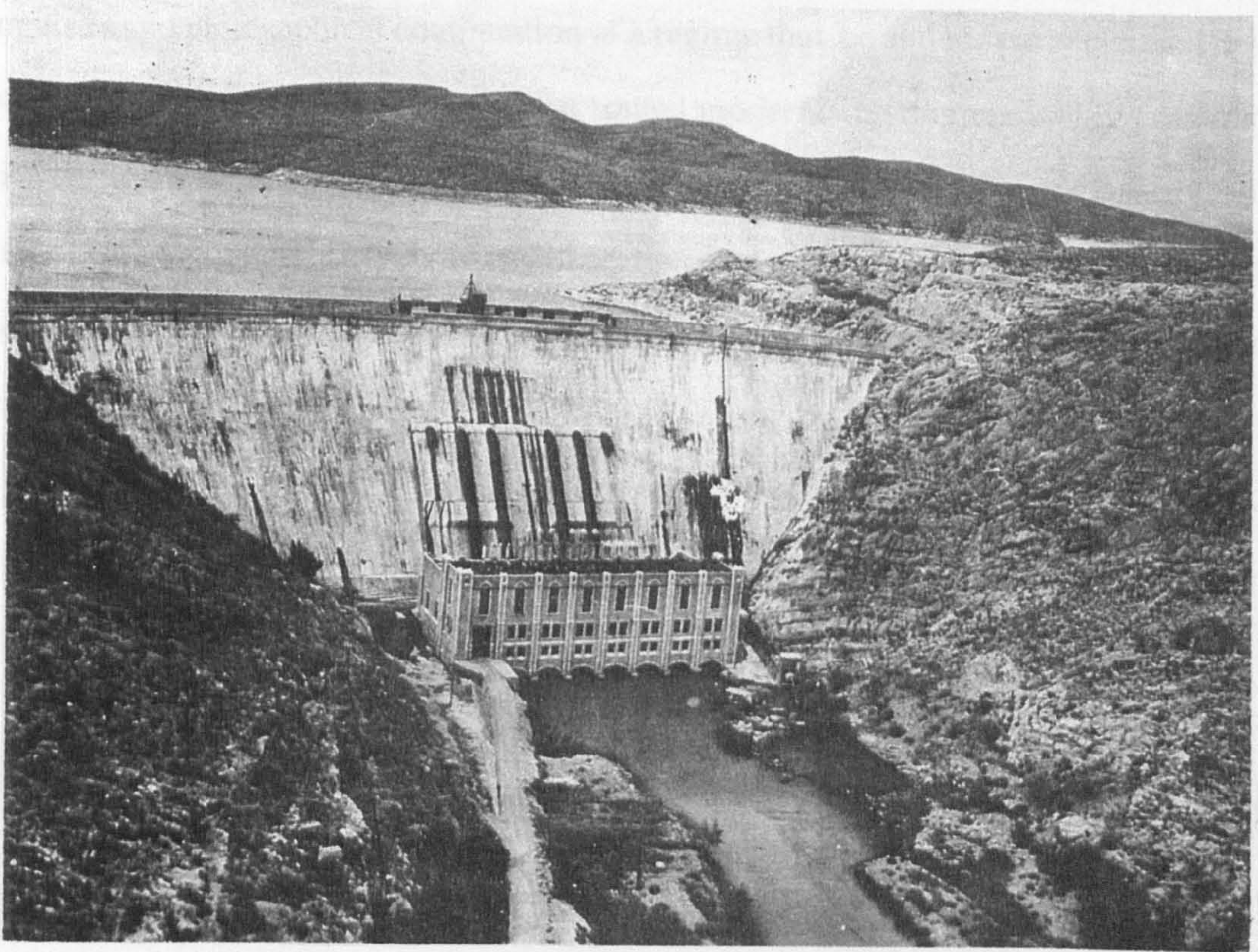
What occurred in Delicias was the institution of a political project of modernity that was 'una máscara...Un simulacro urdido por las élites y los aparatos estatales...'<sup>10</sup> Behind the showy facade of 'revolutionary' modern development, Delicias was experiencing uneven modernization, the benefits of which were not available to the majority of its population. Indeed, the town was the result of these inconsistencies. By reviving traditional socio-political alliances such as the *hacienda* system within the framework of the plan for modernization, the State engineered a society that was both semi-oligarchic and semi-industrial. It was caught at the conjuncture of different cultural temporalities, that elite powers were able to manipulate and profit from.

To conclude, the irrigation programme alloyed modern engineering techniques and the Sonorans' liberal vision of the small, capital intensive private farmer, to mirror the Californian paradigm, developing in Calles's words an agricultura 'científica'. The term

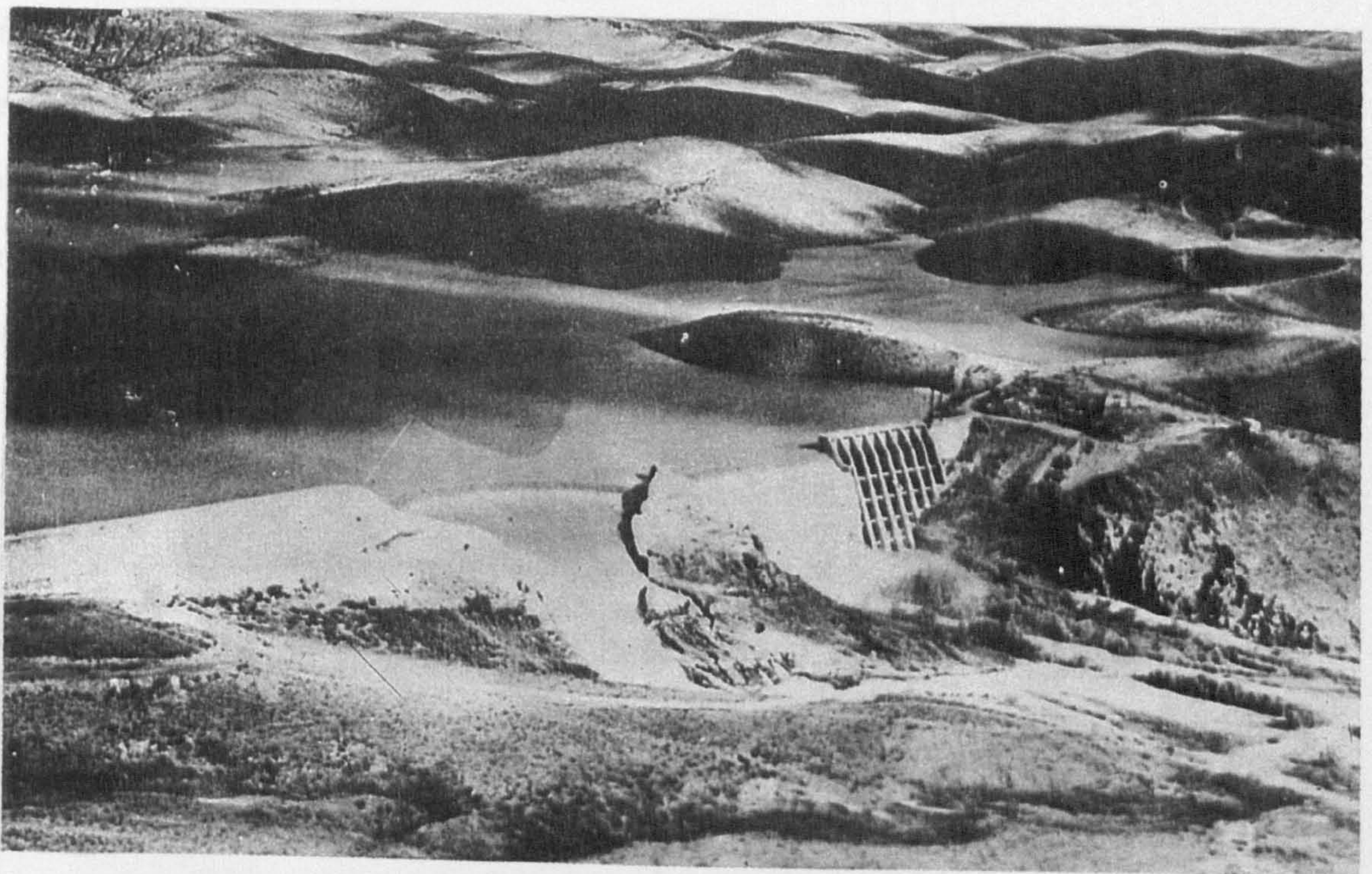


The dams of *Riego 05 - la Boquilla* and *Las Vírgenes*. (Photographs and text from the Rotary Club's *Ciudad Delicias: xxv aniversario*.)

*Presa de la Boquilla, cuya capacidad de almacenamiento es de 2,982,000,000 Mts.<sup>3</sup> y de una extensión de 17,520 Hs...*



*Formidable vista panorámica aérea de la presa Francisco I. Madero (Las Vírgenes) con almacenamiento útil de 425 millones de metro cúbicos.*





echoes the name and language of the *científicos*, the positivists that had dominated Mexican political philosophy with the twin 'logics' of science and capital before the Revolution. In reiterating it, Calles implicitly maintained the traditions of Porfirio Díaz, a linguistic and philosophical continuation of a regime that he and his party claimed to have swept away. Out of the PRI's positivist tinged modernising dogma, and in conjunction with its denial of the peasantry's demands for land and social reform, Ciudad Delicias was born. Its existence was founded in the dual privileging of modern production techniques and private ownership, spawned to bring 'un desarrollo agrícola moderno, plenamente capitalista'.<sup>11</sup>

### **Placeres and *La canción de las mulas muertas***

How does the political agenda for modernization inherent within the construction of Delicias carry over and mutate into Placeres? What is Gardea's critical position in relation to this? He does not seem to enter into an explicit, political critique of the central State. Rather he engages, as Deleuze and Guattari say of Franz Kafka, in 'A micropolitics, a politics of desire that questions all situations.'<sup>12</sup> In this way, he makes multiple connections between the 'everyday' actions of the inhabitants of Placeres and the wider socio-political field.

The connections are not achieved through metaphoric or symbolic references to State activity. Rather, the narratives of Placeres are loaded with socio-historical and political forces that make entrances into the texts as extensions of State history. These entrances are subtle yet inextricable, the Mexican State simultaneously distant and close.<sup>13</sup> They take the form of new kinds of technology and means of production, and different patterns of social and economic behaviour.

This section will explore how Gardea's texts become a subtle, yet subversive critique of central State hegemony in Chihuahua. Firstly, it will address the broader impact of State modernization projects on Delicias and how this transmits to Placeres in the form of socio-economic transformations. Secondly, it will examine specific new technologies that the modernizing process introduced to the towns, analysing how modern goods are perceived and made use of in the *cotidiano*.

In the short story 'La acequia', from the collection *Los viernes de Lautaro*, the PRI's dream of a society based upon agricultural productivity through scientific innovation and small land owning farmers, is shattered. Two armed brothers go to the house of Anastasio Madrid, to extract dice gambling debts he owes to their father. Madrid lives on the periphery of the town and his home is flanked by an irrigation channel. He is possibly a migrant farmer that settled in Delicias, attracted by government propaganda. But the irrigation channel on his land has run dry. Instead of carrying water, it is clogged with the debris of death - 'La acequia no traía agua, pero su cauce estaba lleno de hojas muertas.' (p.38) (Perhaps he was one of the farmers that could no longer afford to pay for the services of *Riego 05*, and whose water supply was subsequently cut off, and now spends his nights gambling in the town.) Madrid's assailants, the debt collectors, use the trench to conceal themselves and spy on him. No longer a functioning part of the irrigation system, it is a tool for the tactics of their war. But Madrid is aware of their presence and waits with his rifle. When one of the brothers approaches the house, Madrid shoots him and he crawls back wounded to the channel. The 'acequia' becomes a space of death, an open grave:

...mi hermano volvió muy pronto a la acequia, de nalgas y con un gran balazo de Anastasio Madrid en el pecho.

Madrid estaba parado delante de la puerta lila de su casa y nos apuntaba con un rifle. Estaba parado, pisando las hojas. (p.39)



In this transformation of the irrigation channel, the very basis of Delicias as a 'modern' town is simultaneously destroyed and re-invented. The channel's symbolic modernity and its agroindustrial function collapse, as the social practices of feuds, gambling and debt violence take it over. What emerges is a new cultural space, at the conjuncture of modernization and local tradition, that cannot be controlled by centralised power.

In conjunction with *la pequeña propiedad*, the central State encouraged small-scale, private businessmen to set up in the new town Delicias, as part of their plans for modernization along capitalist lines. Service industries boomed as a consequence, attracting entrepreneurs such as Gardea's parents who set up a shop in the town. In *La canción de las mulas muertas*, Gardea engages in this mercantile experience, the narrative driven by the economic competition of two ambitious businessmen. The tale centres around the violent confrontation of Leónidas Góngora, a bar owner and Fausto Vargas, the boss of a drink bottling factory producing *refrescos*. Their struggle for power comes from hybrid desires - economic gain and machismo pride. While they use new innovations of business capitalism - technological capital ('produced means of production') - they implement them through the traditional power structures of the local boss, or *cacique*. As García Canclini suggests, this hybrid combination was common to Mexico and other Latin American countries in the mid-20th century, when 'los avances tecnológicos' were instituted through existing 'estructuras de poder alianzas informales', such as *caciquismo*.<sup>14</sup> In Chihuahua, the tradition of *caciquismo* was extremely powerful due to the region's geographic isolation from the nation's political centre in Mexico City. Furthermore, throughout history Chihuahuan communities had produced highly organised regional militia groups led by local bosses to counter the territorial ambitions of both 'los indios barbaros' (the Apache) and the U.S.A. While Luis Terrazas was the most powerful and influential *cacique*, controlling much of the state between 1866-1910 - he wrote its laws, had a personal army and generally defied the power of national legal and political institutions - each sub-region had its own boss. These men competed for regional power through building networks of allies and

employees in a culture dominated by feuds, murder, revenge killings and acts of sabotage. Vargas and Góngora are in some ways products of this tradition and exist in Gardea's novel at the interstice of modern industrial practices and pre-existing systems of socio-economic power. The aura of modernity that surrounds their factory and bar shrouds older social relations that continue to shape the cultural landscape.

As a 'modernizing' force, Góngora is the more aggressive. He brings alien technologies to Placeres, his financial success stemming from his use of relatively modern artefacts and tools. His bar - based upon Gardea's memories of a *Delicias cantina* called *Topo Chico*<sup>15</sup> - utilises newly imported goods. It is covered with large polished mirrors, has shiny brass spittoons, a record player, a marble bar with 'bancos modernos para sentarse a beber' (p.35), an extensive selection of exotic drinks, a huge refrigerator - all 'importado' (p.9). The emphasis on smooth, sharp edged surfaces is high, particularly metallic ones. They project prestige and power in the 'developing' world of Placeres, forming a new metallic and imported reality for the locals, who react with fascination and awe. They constitute the 'modern' desire to be surrounded by the controlled 'smoothness' of tools, which Elias Canetti links to power, through their relationship to weapons and teeth.<sup>16</sup>

Vargas both envies and is disturbed by the modern goods in Góngora's bar - 'Lo atormentaban los lujos del otro.' (p.10) He comments to Gil, 'la cuestión es que aquí hemos estado desde un principio todos. Menos Leónidas Góngora.' (p.11) Góngora's presence marks a territorial threat and a challenge to Vargas's 'progressive' image. He resents an outsider taking on the mantle of modernization in Placeres, seeing himself as the local pioneer of technology and industrialisation. 'Después de todo', he comments to his employee Gil, 'nosotros iniciamos la vida industrial en Placeres.' (p.21) Vargas's resentment of Góngora is intensified because he is a 'forastero', an immigrant in Placeres, whose 'prosperidad...no es natural' (p.20). The fear and resentment of *forasteros* is salient in Gardea's work, and can be linked to the historical experience of colonisation in Chihuahua. From the 16th to the early 20th century, the isolated Chihuahuan settlements were periodically attacked by indigenous raiding parties -



A bar in Ciudad Delicias, 1993.



Reception desk of *Hotel América*, Ciudad Delicias. Local history and culture is captured in the pictures displayed. From right to left - the founder of Delicias, an indigenous nomad of the *llano*, Riego 05 dam *Las Vírgenes*, Jesús Cristo, and in the foreground a *refresco*.





Apaches and Comanches from the north. In the 1840s this threat of invasion was augmented by the border dispute war with the USA in which the US army penetrated deep into Chihuahuan territory. In the revolutionary years until 1920, bandits and roving revolutionary units and militias preyed upon the undefended *pueblos* of the *llano* region. In this way, communities of suspicion developed, in which the *forastero*, the outsider, was perceived as a threat to human life and social stability. This perception continued in the post-revolutionary period in the new town Delicias which experienced mass immigration from surrounding rural areas and the southern states.<sup>17</sup> Many of the jobs promised by the State did not materialise and the town's infrastructure was unable to cope with the demographic explosion, and the majority of *colonos*, as they are still known, were forced to live in shanty towns that surround the city. This pattern of constant immigration and its social problems was resented by early colonisers, who felt threatened by the excess supply of labour and the appropriation of the town they felt responsible for founding and constructing.

Vargas's envy and distrust of Góngora becomes obsessive in *La canción de las mulas muertas* and he sends his employees to spy on him and relay his movements. From the spies' information, he attempts to calculate how busy Góngora's bar is, how much money he takes, who drinks there, and what kind of gun he carries. Discovering the extent of his rival's commercial success, Vargas challenges him to a game of dominoes, with the wager that the victor gains the loser's business. Góngora wins the game, but is wracked by guilt at dispossessing Vargas. His guilt is intensified by being haunted by a murder he committed years before he moved to Placeres. Behind the flashy modern facade of the bar, lingers a violent death - '...en el fondo de las maravillas del Bar, lloraba un muerto.' (p.22) Tormented, Góngora ignores Vargas's factory, which is left to decay. The roof collapses and the sweet air that used to surround it from the fruit drinks turns bitter and rank. (p.90)

Góngora leaves Placeres to search for the soul of the man he killed and Vargas loses his mental capacities, dying of an unknown illness. The destruction caused by their socio-economic rivalry has a wider effect - it is wreaked upon the whole of Placeres,



which becomes a ghost town from where the tale is narrated seven years later.<sup>18</sup> Placeres is swallowed up by the desert, the clash of capitalist and *machista* honour destroying the town, allowing the *llano* to reclaim the land.

### **Liquid and Modernity: Nomads, Water and *Refrescos***

Throughout the desert regions of central Chihuahua, lakes, waterholes and oases form the locale of communities for reasons related to water supply. Historically, indigenous nomadic groups of the *llano* such as the pimas, jumiles, and the conchos used the scarce and isolated oases as a geophysical network for their constantly shifting communities. The oases formed a mapping process of life support, allowing a culture of territorial mobility. In contrast, Delicias was located in relation to the irrigation supply of *Riego 05*, forming an artificial oasis to be colonised by a static population - an isolated community serving the wider projects of urbanisation and the 'progressive' development of the Mexican nation-state. The engineering technology of *Riego 05* transformed irrevocably the Chihuahuan *llano*; the hostile and arid environment was turned into a green island of agricultural productivity. What Deleuze and Guattari call the 'smooth space' of the *llano*, the open topology of the nomad, became 'striated' by sedentary existence, by the grids of agricultural production:

One of the fundamental tasks of the State is to striate the space over which it reigns, or to utilize smooth spaces as a means of communication in the service of striated space. It is a vital concern of every State not only to vanquish nomadism but to control migrations and, more generally, to establish a zone of rights over an entire 'exterior', over all the flows traversing the ecumenon.<sup>19</sup>

The man-made oasis of Delicias was sustained by a network of concrete waterways, pumps and hydro technologies. The flows of water through its channels carried the desires of the State, becoming flows of capital, political will and modernizing zeal. The

town was also constructed in proximity to the existing railroad between Juárez and México D.F., rather than to a river source, as was the traditional method of settlement location.<sup>20</sup> Delicias was thus integrated from its birth, to the transport and communications network of the nation.

The oasis and its relationship to a nomadic existence contrasts with the sense of claustrophobia and stasis in *La canción de las mulas muertas*. What was once a nomadic, mobile population of the desert, is now a stationary and artificial 'community' bent on covert operations, competition and feuds. In Placeres, tensions work inwards, in the desire for 'development' within a fixed geographical framework, rather than in an outward nomadic movement across the horizon. That the tale is centred around a bar and a drink making factory, intensifies this sense of the changing space of the *llano*; the bar and factory becoming modern mutations of the oasis. In the dusty heat of Placeres, liquid and its availability still dominate the inhabitants' lives, but it has been transformed by the technology of irrigation and a modern drinking culture. The water of the oasis has stagnated, becoming bitter in the alcohol of Góngora's bar, 'el comercio de vinos y licores' (p.48), and sweet and rank in the *refrescos* of Vargas's factory.

The 'artificiality' of liquid is intensified by its injection with carbon gas from the *embotelladora*, the bottling machine in Vargas's factory, which forces a build up of uncontainable pressure. Gil, an employee of Vargas, warns Góngora of the danger as he watches in fascination, the drink bottling process:

-Señor Góngora -le dijo Gil-, mejor es que usted se retire a un lado antes de que yo empiece. Las botellas vacías, con la presión del gas, a veces revientan. Un vidrio como navaja pudiera herirlo a usted...yo no sé qué pasaría si un vidrio le entrara a usted en el cuello. (p.26/27)

This threat of the pressure reaching levels of uncontainable intensity, dangerous to the human body, pervades the text. It becomes the dynamic experience of a society undergoing the cultural stress of modernization, the agents of which can penetrate and cut into human flesh.<sup>21</sup> As a totem of 'modernity', the *embotelladora* is at the heart of these



tensions, located at 'la mitad de la fábrica' (p.11). It forces gas through mechanical means into contained spaces that cannot embody its energy without violent reactions. Placeres becomes a mechanical oasis - instead of water it provides alcohol and sweet soda drinks, and rather than a 'source' of life it is the location of modern transformations and death.

In the short story, 'Puente de sombra', from the collection *Las luces del mundo*, this pattern continues in direct relation to *Riego 05*. A man is forced into the water of an irrigation 'canal', before being shot dead by his adversaries. The channel acts as a physical boundary, that limits the man's movements, preventing him from fleeing from his enemies into the *llano*. Resigned to his fate, the man watches the currents of the channel, the sunlight on the water and the bridges of shadow that cross the artificial river. The man knows he will die there, but as he imagines his death, the bridges of shadow offer an escape from the linear water trap, a means of flight across the man-made 'canal'. Along them, 'se escapa el alma de los muertos.' (p.44) The rigid physical parameters, the striated forms of *Riego 05* are dissolved by this spiritual action. As in 'La acequia', the irrigation channel, a limb of the mechanical oasis, is culturally transformed from its 'modernizing' agroindustrial function. Firstly, through its spatial use as a trap by the killers and then more radically, as the condemned man's perceptions of the channel transmute it into a site for spiritual activity and freedom.

### Technology and Cultural Hybridity

Nature does not construct machines...rather [they are] organs of the human will to dominate nature or to realise itself therein. They are organs of the human brain, created by human hands, the power of knowledge created into an object.

Karl Marx<sup>22</sup>

The *embotelladora* - 'La máquina, con su pedal, con sus manijas y cabeza de bronce; con sus mangueritas alimentadoras por donde descendían los jarabes y corría el agua célis a la botella...' (p.11) - has a metallic and mechanical intensity in Placeres. It enters and shapes the consciousness of all who come into its sphere of influence.<sup>23</sup> Vargas covets its bronze head, iron base, levers and pipes. He is drawn to its hypnotic glow, generated by the interaction of its shiny metal dome with the Chihuahuan sun, his eyes seized and filled by the experience:

Tenía un fulgorcito amarillo metido en los ojos, rebote de la luz en el bronce de la máquina. (p.23)

The machine takes hold of Vargas's being, its spherical shape and golden colour, modernity's mutation of the sun. While Vargas can not look directly into the sun or own it for himself, while it is no longer a god, the drink machine can be viewed, touched, worshipped and possessed. The rebounding of light captures this relationship, refracting from sun to machine, to man, filling his eyes with its luminescence.

The sound of the machine penetrates even deeper. As Gil operates it, the noise of its functioning mixes with the smell of the syrups and the buzzing of insects:

El ruido monótono del gas al entrar a las botellas, el sonsonente de las abejas y las moscas, el rico olor de los jarabes, fueron apoderándose de la conciencia de Fausto Vargas y cerrándole despacio los ojos. (p.12)

As the machine forces the gas into the bottles, Vargas's perceptions are permeated by its mechanical monotony.

Years after the domino game, when the *refresco* factory has fallen into dilapidation through Góngora's neglect, a man comes to buy the *embotelladora* from him. The machine is covered with dust, but when the man drags his finger across the bronze dome and it catches the light, 'el animalero dorado de la fábrica...' (p.86) awakens and the man



*La humanidad progresa por la audacia de sus innovadores.* Anónimo, 1949. Colección Hermanos Sabinas, Esperanza, Puebla, México.





offers 300 *pesos* for it. The man is drawn to it, inexorably; '...toda su atención se la absorbía la *embotelladora*; la estaba viendo como se ve un fenómeno en el circo.' (p.86) At the same time, the sight of the machine conjures up images in Góngora's mind of Gil operating the machine years ago, a ghostly and hallucinatory vision:

Gil, con un pie en el pedal y las manos agarradas a las manijas de la cabeza, perfumado, como metido con su máquina en un huerto de naranjos, lo estaba mirando. (p.85)

There is a sense of the fetishism of commodities here, in Marx's sense of the term. The *embotelladora* is an object of *capital* - a produced means of production - but in its exportation to Placeres, it becomes dislocated from the social nature of its production by a labour force. In the process the machine takes on an independent/autonomous identity, which is magical for those that come into contact with it. Objects of capital such as the *embotelladora*, become fantastic, alien creations, 'cosas trasplantadas de otro mundo...' (p.85), that disrupt traditional patterns of production and consumption in Placeres. It is not the men that own the *embotelladora*, but the machine magically produced by capitalism that possesses them; it captures their desires in its hypnotic glow. Deleuze and Guattari call this kind of experience the 'miraculation' of capital - 'Machines and agents cling so closely to capital that their very functioning appears to be miraculated by it.'<sup>24</sup> As a piece of capital, the *embotelladora* seems to possess this 'miraculous', influential power that extends beyond its physical dimensions. It is an animated, gleaming new birth - 'el animalero dorado' - an irresistible 'modern' occult delivery of capitalism that is part of a larger social production process.

Tools, as Marshall McLuhan says, are 'extensions of man'. But this terminology is complicated if, as in the case of the *embotelladora*, the means of production, the techniques, the materials, the skilled labour, the capital to produce such tools are absent. In the rural isolation of Placeres/Delicias in the 1940s-'50s, machines such as the *embotelladora*, were imported from distant and foreign manufacturing centres across the US border and the Atlantic ocean. However, the 'other world' was 'Mexican', as much as European and North American. Unknown to the people of Placeres, the *embotelladora*



was already old technology in other parts of the nation. According to the man that comes to buy it, there are new machines that are made of steel, not bronze and it is as if Placeres is moving through different metallic ages at a speed much slower than the national urban environment. As P. Osburne states, 'Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological, category.'<sup>25</sup> While successive Mexican regimes strove against this statement, attempting to unify the rate of modern 'progress' within a single set time frame across the nation, as Placeres suggests, the country experienced an inconsistent and uneven development. Modernization as a national project, became truncated, and as Canclini states, 'inaccesible para la mayoría.'<sup>26</sup>

In Placeres, goods such as the *embotelladora* were still relatively rare, 'strange' and expensive at this time. As such, their existence produced in the inhabitants a sense of modernity without the experience of the wider socio-economic practices of modernization experienced in varying degrees from Europe and the USA, to Mexico City. These included - changes in the structure of labour markets and trade unions, new industrial production techniques and patterns of work, the boom in affordable domestic appliances. Thus Placeres, in its rural isolation, had its own unique experience of modernization, quite different to that of urban centres such as Ciudad Juárez to the north and México D.F. to the south. While some technologies filtered through, others were absent for decades, different technics and machines from contrasting spatiotemporal dimensions existing side by side, producing the 'modern' experience of heterogeneous simultaneity.

With the advent of electronic technology, commodity fetishism intensified and the distance between sites of production and consumption increased. Electronic goods such as the record player and the refrigerator in Góngora's Bar, were probably imported from the USA. Here, Placeres connects with the mass influx of technology from abroad that was experienced in Mexico in the 1940s-'50s. José Agustín describes the flow as:

una invasión de aparatos electrodomésticos: refrigeradores, lavadoras, licuadoras, planchas, aspiradoras, cobijas eléctricas y demás maravillas-del-mundo-occidental.<sup>27</sup>

While machines were created, as Marx states, through 'the power of knowledge', in Placeres the inhabitants do not experience them through the same cognitive and knowledge systems that produced them. Indeed, knowledge of this kind is absent in the interaction; the machines are not experienced through an intellectual consciousness. Rather, the impact of the machines is felt through a wider perceptive field, which Merleau-Ponty describes as the phenomenology of perception. Like Merleau-Ponty, Gardea seeks:

...that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.<sup>28</sup>

Rather than an intimacy with the 'knowledge' that built the machines, the people of Placeres experience new technology through the overbearing concerns of daily life - the climate, stellar movements, changing sunlight, the fragility of the human body. The machines are not 'parts' of a smoothly functioning contemporary reality built upon accepted patterns of human logic and invention, rather they become intimate organs of pre-existing perceptive realities. Thus, the machine as an 'extension of man', functions not just in the sense of a tool extending the physical capabilities of the human body - a hammer as an extension of the hand etc. - but also in the wider field of human perceptions, which are 'extended' and transformed by the machine's presence.

An older piece of machinery - the gun - gives further insight to the relationship of technology and society in *La canción de las mulas muertas*. Góngora frequently displays a *pistola* in public to intimidate his enemies. This kind of behaviour was not unusual in the mid 20th century and can be linked to Chihuahua's history of violence, in which 'muchas personas usaban pistola'.<sup>29</sup> After centuries of regional violence - expelling indigenous peoples, the wars with the Apache and the USA, the Revolution and wide scale banditry - guns became integral to cultural life. In 1952, at the age of thirteen,



Gardea saw the corpse of a local man Emiliano Laing Asís, shot by political opponents at the time Ruiz Cortines was elected to power:

Yo vi una tarde el cuerpo de Emiliano Laing Asís, cuando lo traían muerto, con un balazo en la cabeza, del llano, en una manta de soldado. Pasó por delantito de mí. Su cabeza parecía una calabaza por dentro; le habían volado la frente con una bala expansiva.<sup>30</sup>

This image of the exploded skull of a man he knew, was extremely powerful for Gardea and gun deaths punctuate many of his narratives - men are shot in *El diablo en el ojo*, 'Trinitario', 'Puente de sombra', 'Soñar la guerra', 'La paga' and 'Acuérdense del silencio'. In this sense, Góngora's pistol is not merely a symbol of machismo power, it is a technological and mechanical threat to Vargas's life and his attempts to gain Góngora's bar; an 'objeto de sospecha' (p.45) Vargas tries to find out its calibre and size, how often Góngora carries it, whether he will be armed when they gamble at dominoes. Through the pistol, Góngora benefits from what Mumford describes as the logic of all machines - 'to extend the powers of the otherwise unarmed organism, to fortify and sustain the human organism.'<sup>31</sup> The gun is the ultimate machine in this respect, 'arming' Góngora and augmenting his power as the wielder of technological violence in the town.

The pistol carries and projects 'modern' forces - precision engineering, mechanical processes, the smooth functionality of the manufactured product - upon Placeres. These interact with the 'natural' phenomena that envelope the town - sunlight, heat, air - in a complex relationship. The interaction is intense and uneasy, generating constantly changing fields of perception and disturbed realities that begin to shape the town. Góngora threatens Gil with his pistol and 'El cañón niquelado agitó el aire, produjo un remolino de fulgores.' (p.81) The light and air have been energized, made electric and altered irrevocably by the gun in a transmission of 'artificial' and 'natural' forces. Earlier in the narrative, the metallic form of the pistol interacts with the setting sun:



El sol tardío venía a meterse a la boca del cañón, como un viejo con una lámpara a la boca de un túnel. Este fenómeno, que les permitía ver, por el estado de ánimo en que estaban y por las cualidades del aire a esa hora, las entrañas del arma, la bala dorada, les infundía un miedo inmenso a los enemigos, y no se podían mover. (p.57)

The penetration of the gun and its transformation of perceptive fields also operates on the flesh of the human body. Each night, as he gets drunk in his bar, Góngora waits with the gun in his lap for the arrival of his enemies - his 'antiguos clientes' - who come to avenge Vargas. When they appear, it is not clear whether they are phantoms or men, or both, but they freeze in fear when Góngora levels the pistol at them and flee when he fires it, to the street corners and shadows. Victorious, 'Góngora se sonreía detrás de la pistola' (p.57), but while the power of the gun terrorises the intruders, it penetrates his very being:

Góngora sentía despierta la pistola en la mano, con pulso, con palpitations...El palpar, intenso en el gatillo, como un fuego, le quemaba el índice. Pero el fuego, cundidor, remontaba el brazo hasta la plaza del corazón. (p.59)

The gun has come alive in his hands, the pulse of its mechanical body - the metallic 'organs' of the trigger, the dropping hammer, the spinning bullet, the turning chamber - locking in to the beating of his heart and overpowering it:

El dedo de Góngora en el gatillo seguía ardiendo. En el corazón de Góngora había ya una atmósfera, un aire estancado, de muerte... (p.59)

The metallic force of the gun in his hand spreads through the organs and flesh of his body. 'Me estoy quemando' (p.60), he tells Sixtino Garza, the handling of the gun becoming as dangerous as the impact of its projectiles. Rather than Mumford's 'sustaining', 'extending' and 'fortifying' the 'otherwise unarmed organism', the pistol takes charge of and destroys its operator.



In addition to the gun, Góngora uses another instrument, his record player, to fend off the advancing 'confabulados'. He plays disc after disc, bombarding them with sound and preventing their entry into the becoming-modern space of the bar. 'La música de la victrola de Góngora...acongojaba el alma o ponía espinosos los oídos.' The enemies are subsumed by the sonic attack, they are unable to 'protestar contra las voces de la victrola' (p.58). Their threats and curses, that haunt Góngora through the summer nights, can no longer be heard, except in the gaps between records:

Cuando el de la victrola cambiaba de disco, los hombres,  
en ese lapso de silencio, abrían las mandíbulas,  
recuperaban la vertical y maldecían fúricamente. (p.57)

One night, the *confabulados* come to burn Góngora and *el Bar* with torches. In the light of their advance:

Fundirían los metales del Bar. Las imágenes de Leónidas  
Góngora escondidas en los espejos. Pero una almendra  
había de tener el incendio: la victrola y los discos, y el  
cuerpecito del propietario, juntos. (p.56)

This fusing of the metal of the Bar, melts together the record player, the silver plated mirrors and the gun, to the human flesh of Góngora. Together they form a technological mass, a compacted and smooth formation that enters Placeres with great density and force.

The fusing continues in the murder of Gil, by Ramos. The barman uses two bullets:

Una de las balas le quebró el pecho a Gil. La otra, mejor  
orientada, le apagó para en la cabeza el silbato del tren.  
Cayó Gil Triana como un remolino que se desinfla.  
(p.102)

The simultaneity of the gunshot and the whistle of the train is a moment of vital intensity. Modernity locks together at this instant, the two sounds erupting from the comparative mechanical systems of gun and train. Like the metal of the bar, they fuse together - the



swivel of gun chamber and the turn of the wheel; the motion of bullet and train; the explosions of gunpowder and steam - and impact on human flesh. This convergence of forces is like a vector - a compact quantity with direction as well as magnitude - capable of immense speed and penetration.<sup>32</sup> Human energy is a vital to the vector. Though mechanically produced, the velocity of the bullet is 'human' - the gun was built by the energies of human labour. This is a reversal of the kind of commodity fetishism described above, in which the product is dislocated from its production by a labour force, giving it an independent and therefore 'magical' identity. Here, the commodity is humanised - the energies of human production are transferred through the weapon into bullets, that become 'bits' of human beings.

Placeres and its inhabitants are vulnerable to the vector of forces - it intersects other speeds and energies that constitute the *cotidiano* of the town. The pace of life in Placeres - its 'velocity' - is much slower, shaped by less dense and compact forces. In contrast to the manufactured product, its speed is related to the gradual movement of the sun crossing the sky, the settling of dust in the streets and the lengthening of shadows on buildings. In the cultural life of the town, time passes with long siestas, drinking sessions, dominoe games and gambling. Rhythmic intensity is formed by the sounds of the *llano* - the wind, the buzzing of insects, the shifting of dust particles, and in the silences, the visceral movements of the human body. In the violence of the killing scene described above, these rhythms and speeds are ruptured. The effect may appear short lived - the mechanical sounds of gunshot and steam are intermittent and are soon replaced by rhythms of dust, wind, insects and the human body. Yet the power of the convergence of mechanical and 'modern' human forces, resonates throughout the text, transforming the cultural heart of Placeres irrevocably. All sounds, rhythms and times are now experienced in relation to it.



**'Vámonos ya': Technology and the 'Supernatural'**

Technique, or technology, processes of analysis, synthesis  
and instrumentality operate always on 'living flesh'.

Eric Mottram<sup>33</sup>

In interview, Jesús Gardea claims affinity to the Luddite movement of the English industrial revolution.<sup>34</sup> This would seem to be affirmed by his personal approach to machinery: the face of his watch is splintered and cracked, the metal strap is faulty and needs constant refastening: he treats his car with contempt and is uncomfortable driving: he does not own a television, distrusting it as an instrument of 'substitución', that generates a false reality, 'una fantasma de la vida' and would rather look at the play of light on a glass of water, than watch its electrical images.<sup>35</sup> In his writing technique, he shuns modern word processing in favour of a 1960s manual typewriter, preferring the sensual experience of the touch and smell of paper and ink and the interaction of fingers and moving keys, to microchip technology. However, this intimacy with the typewriter suggests a fascination with pre-electric, mechanical technology that undermines his contempt. In his writing, both in the literal/physical sense of his use of the typewriter and in the texts themselves, Gardea's relationship to mechanical technology is by no means destructive as his 'luddite' claims suggest. Neither do his fictions romanticise a pre-industrial reality in which man 'communed' closer with 'nature', in the absence of technological incursions.

What emerges is his intention to expose the *hybridity* of modern Chihuahuan culture, a state induced by 'los cruces socioculturales en que lo tradicional y lo moderno se mezclan'<sup>36</sup> In this relationship, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, modern and foreign technologies are not dominant forces that substitute and overcome traditional and local cultures, but active components of the experience of a 'heterogeneidad multitemporal'.<sup>37</sup> This sense of modernity as the experience of multiple times was



discussed above through the interaction of 'modern' machinery with elements of the *cotidiano* in Placeres - the traditional social relations of the local *cacique*, the physical environment of the surrounding *llano*, the fragility of the human body and its plural consciousness. But in the short story 'Vámonos ya', from the collection *De alba sombría*, the interaction extends to 'supernatural' phenomena, through the medium of a Ford automobile.

In 'Vámonos ya', Antolín is visited by two independent parties of debt collectors. The first are financial *cobradores*. They come to recover outstanding payments on a refrigerator that Antolín has attempted to avoid paying for, through falsifying names. He fends off their questions and threats and they leave with nothing. The second party arrive in a black Ford motor-car - they have come to collect his soul.

From the moment the car comes into view, Antolín's behaviour changes - he virtually ignores the men talking to him and becomes transfixed by the approaching vehicle. He seems to enter a state of trance, an altered state of consciousness in which his sensory perceptions are intensified and disrupted by the dynamic interaction of technology and spiritual activity that emanate from the Ford. As he narrates, his field of perception is taken over, possessed by the alien vehicle and its passengers:

Algo se movió en el interior del Ford. Algo cortó el silencio...Despacio, muy despacio, comenzó a abrirse una puerta del Ford; del lado del volante. Una mano como una flor muerta de sed, apareció al borde de la ventanilla. (p.53)

The driver emerges from the machine. He is 'Delgado como un rayo de luz', and it is as if he has slipped into Antolín's world from another dimension. His movements are slow and hypnotic as he circles the car, tracing his finger through the shell of dust, revealing the black paint work of the Ford - 'El aire, en punto donde la tocaba, se volvía negro tambien; aura resplandor siniestro.' (p.56) His eyes display asymmetrical vision; they operate in plural worlds simultaneously - 'Dios le había puesto los ojos separados como



a las gallinas. Mirando a distintos mundos.' (p.58) For Antolín, the car and its passengers seem to hold the manifold fascination of technology and death. His gaze becomes altered with the intensity, flickering between his 'terrenos' - the *cobradores*' questions, his bottle of beer, the noonday heat - and the conflicting realities of the driver's Ford automobile, parched skin, separated eyes and aura of death.

The car's passenger is female and is seen only as 'una silueta, una mancha inmóvil metida en el Ford.' (p.54) She remains protected from Antolín's gaze by the glass and steel of the car and a veil that the driver tells him she is wearing. He feels/senses, rather than sees/visualises her form:

Sentí algo oscuro, como ala de zopilote en el reflejo del sol  
en el cristal del parabrisas. Giré bruscamente la cabeza.  
No ví nada. (p.61)

The movement is a communicative gesture from the passenger to the driver. He goes to the car and converses with her, 'El alma, en el cristal' (p.54). Antolín hears only 'El rumor de las voces'. (p.61) After several minutes, the driver returns and hands Antolín a piece of paper from the passenger. The note is not transcribed in the text, but it would appear to be a demand for Antolín's soul. At the threshold of death he is speechless:

Lo leí, tres, cuatro veces...Miré al chofer.  
-¿Conoce al tipo? -me preguntó.  
Yo tenía atoradas las palabras, mi vida entera, el sol, en la  
garganta. Miré al parabrisas. Y otra vez al chofer.  
Entonces él me dijo, tomándome de un brazo, con su mano  
de flor:  
-Bueno, Antolín; venga, vámonos ya. (p.62)

The occupant of the car is death in a corporeal, feminized form - possibly *la Muerte*, a widely acknowledged figure of death in Mexican folk belief. The driver is her emissary, he refers to her as 'mi clienta', his form existing as a communicative interfold of the 'living' and the 'dead', an intermediary between different, yet connected worlds.

'Vámonos ya' appears to be located in the 1940s or '50s in a small rural *pueblo* in the *llano*, rather than in a town such as Delicias. While agricultural production boomed from



Automobile service advertisement, Ciudad Delicias, 1958. Elevated on a plinth, the car becomes a vision of the American gothic in northern Mexico in the 1950s.

# SERVICIOS - LUBRI - LAVA

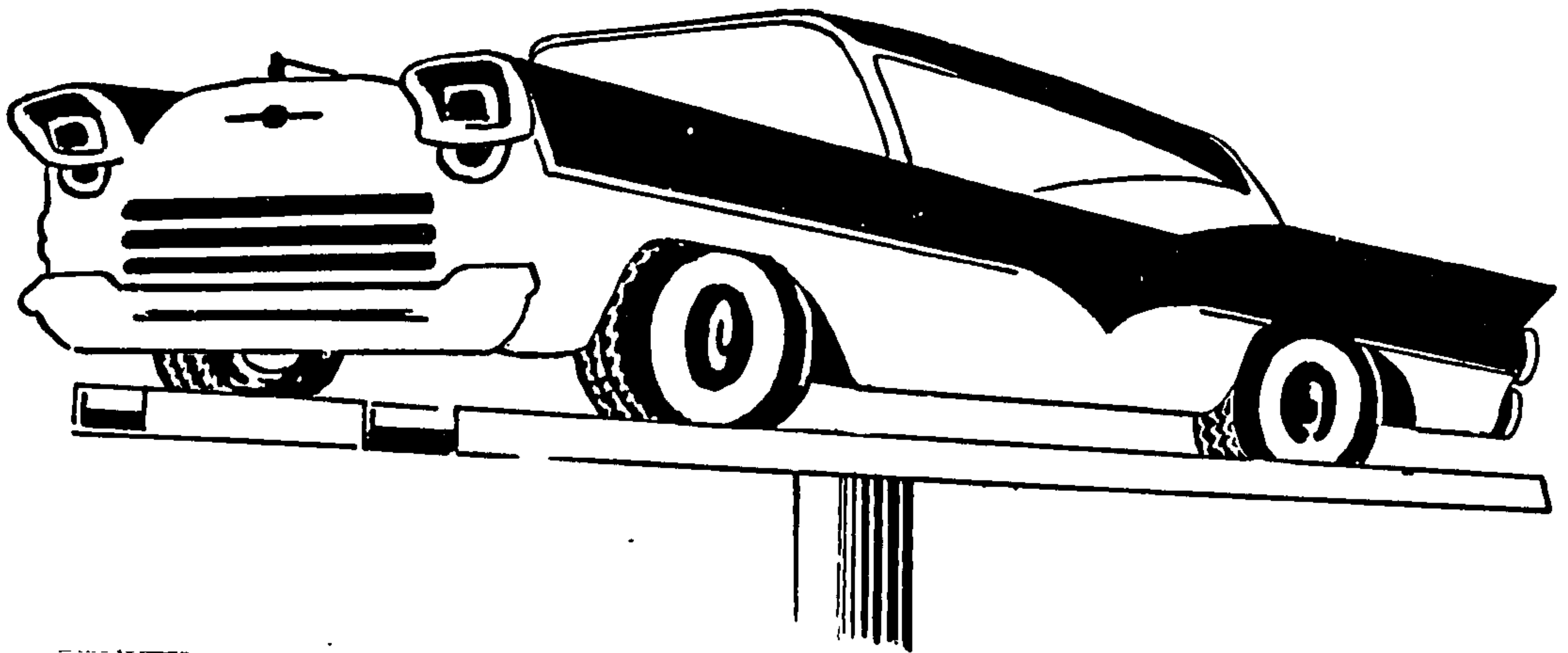
Calle 3a. Nte.

Teléfono 177

Cd. Delicias

lavado - engrasado - lubricación - empastado.

Aceites y Grasas de todas marcas.





the late 1930s due to *Riego 05*, and Delicias expanded rapidly, older and smaller rural *pueblos* of the region remained isolated with relatively low standards of living. In contrast to the State's model of Mexican development in Delicias, these *pueblos* experienced a much slower rate of modernization. But while their economic and geographic isolation allowed them to maintain many rural traditions that were diminished in the cities, they were under constant and increasing pressure from the growth of capitalist exchange values.

In the *pueblo* of 'Vámonos ya', technology and machines seem alien and threatening to Antolín's life - socio-economically through the 'hiliera' and physically through the 'carro' and its passengers. The ice-box bought on credit brings the *cobradores* upon him, forcing him into a socio-economic structure of financial dependency and debt, fuelled by the desire to own new consumer products. The car, on the other hand, brings the arrival of death incarnate. Yet, the visit of the *cobradores* and the coming of *la Muerte* are intertwined in the narrative - they are linked through capitalism and technology in debt culture. The motor-car is the most salient object of desire bought on credit in Mexico: more than any other modern product the car signifies financial debt.<sup>38</sup> The arrival of death by car in 'Vámonos ya', seems to synthesize the threat of modern goods on rural culture and society - new credit systems and means of transport - and the pre-industrial spiritual threat of a visitation from dead souls. The synthesis continues in the way that *la Muerte* demands Antolín's soul - through a written note, a business contract - that mirrors the *cobradores'* commercial methods.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the driver refers to the passenger as his 'cliente', a linguistic implication of the financial world. Similarly, the colour of the Ford is not just a sign of fatality. Black signifies; 'It says driving machine, it says high performance, boldness, strictly business'.<sup>40</sup> As death and economic production move closer together through the automobile, 'Vámonos ya' suggests the transformation of death in the social imaginary of north Mexican rural communities, through the penetration of technology and the forces of the capitalist market.



That *la Muerte* should use a Ford automobile as her chosen means of transport, is crucial to this transformation. Her relationship to the car functions at the intersection of the 'logic' of mechanized technology, and the 'non-rational' spiritual beliefs, that exist simultaneously in 20th century Mexican culture. It combines diverse historical and cultural temporalities - pre-Conquest (soul beliefs) and post-industrial (the car) - producing plural temporalities. While the car is a modern threat to traditional ways it is also an object that can be appropriated by those same traditions; it can be driven by 'the dead'. This appropriation generates a process of transculturation, a mutual transformation of different cultures resulting in the experience of new and plural realities. It is a process of *cultural hybridization*, described by Rowe and Schelling as 'the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices.'<sup>41</sup> Through her use of the car, the figure of *la Muerte* becomes detached from her previous context in traditional rural religion, giving her form new cultural significance.

Canclini exposes a similar transcultural process in the ceramic devil figures that have been produced by the *artesanos* of Ocumicho in the state of Michoacán, since the 1960s.<sup>42</sup> In these works, the clay devils were frequently placed among elements of the 'modern' world that did not exist in the *cotidiano* of the village. For example, they piloted aeroplanes or travelled in buses and cars. In this way, like *la Muerte* in 'Vámonos ya', the devil finds new vehicles of expression and movement that do not correspond with its traditional symbolic context as a rural motif of popular religion. For Canclini, this mastering of new technologies by the devils is an attempt by the *artesanos* to control the destructive effects of modernization on their community. By placing the motorised vehicles in the symbolic realm of the devils, they displace the threat of modernization without denying its existence, incorporating the power of its products into popular religious practice and belief. Devil and machine are culturally displaced and re-aligned in the process.



The transcultural process echoes the syncretism of Spanish Catholicism and indigenous beliefs that began in Mexico in the 16th century, in which Catholic religion was subverted and appropriated in both its ritual and physical form by pre-conquest spiritual beliefs. The experience was known as *nepantla* - being caught in the middle, between the new Christian God and the older 'devils' of indigenous religion.<sup>43</sup> While this continues to the present day, the forces of modernization have brought new factors to bear upon the beliefs of the inhabitants of rural Chihuahua. In 'Vámonos ya', rather than Catholicism and the holy Trinity, the modern 'gods' of the industrial revolution are being appropriated in a 20th century mutation of the *nepantla* experience. The possession of the car is crucial to the continuity of Mexican soul beliefs, which constantly seek new vehicles to keep pace with technological transformations. The process is not a rigid utilisation of 'new' gods to satisfy 'old' and static belief systems - magico-religious beliefs have always been flexible in Mexico, changing in response to cultural needs. Within this, there is no desire to maintain fixed beliefs, or to dominate the agents of modernization in order to maintain a homogenous and pure indigenous system. Rather, the 'modern' and the 'traditional' become inseparable, each transforming the other in a 'sedimentación, yuxtaposición y entrecruzamiento de tradiciones indígenas...del hispanismo colonial católico y de las acciones políticas, educativos y comunicacionales modernas.'<sup>44</sup> This interactive process is ceaseless, fuelled by the continual penetration of modern artefacts and goods into the locale, creating the necessity for new forms of ritual, worship and belief to incorporate them into the cultural fabric.

The passengers in 'Vámonos ya', are not spectres or images of death, but tactile bodies, motorised beings. The driver drinks a beer, he sweats, he blinks in the sunlight, he kicks dust off his boots, he coughs, he drives a Ford automobile.<sup>45</sup> This quality draws upon the popular and atavistic belief in rural Mexico of the corporeal nature of souls, in which the dead have bodily form in both the afterlife and in their visits to the world of the living. Yet, Gardea simultaneously invents something new - while the spirits in 'Vámonos ya' have tactile relationships to the car, they also interact with its



manufactured structure in ways that seem to defy their corporeality. Through intensities of light from the Chihuahuan sun, the shell of the industrial product is somehow intersected by the spirits. The glass of the car's windscreen becomes a surface for the 'screening' of this intersection - 'ala de zopilote en el reflejo del sol en el cristal del parabrisas.' (p.61) It is a light event in which technology (the curved windscreen) and the cosmos (the sun) create a screen upon which the vulture's wing can appear. It is a plane that is simultaneously a hard/smooth manufactured product and a screen for the images of dreams to be projected upon. The conceptual worlds of the 'modern', the 'natural' and the 'supernatural' collide here. They become inseparable, and the polyphony of the event takes it beyond the realms of such classifying terms. The spirit *becomes* the glass - 'El alma, en el cristal...' (p.54)

The car is no longer outside the magico-religious practices of the *pueblo*. The symbolic meanings of its metallic and vitreous shapes and forms have been altered and re-aligned as the spirits enter its body. As this occurs, Antolín crosses zones of perception, experiencing plural realities. His visual world becomes increasingly disturbed and when the car drives towards him, the effect of the dust and intense light of the *llano* reacting with the chrome, glass, and steel surfaces of the car, make its passengers momentarily invisible and imperceptible:

Como manejada por nadie, por un soplo, la máquina.  
(p.57)

The fear of a machine's automatic qualities developing beyond human control - total automaton - is combined here with the threat of the machine becoming the possessed 'body' and instrument of the dead.<sup>46</sup> Not only is the machine an 'extension of man', it becomes an extension of the dead; technology operating on, 'dead' as well as 'living flesh'.

In the 1920s and '30s in Mexico, the populist movement of Calles and Vasconcelos sought to commercialise indigenous culture, through venerating its folklore and crafts as



symbols of national identity. Traditional goods and beliefs were transformed, becoming commercial products that could be removed from the cultural specifics of their places of production. In 'Vámonos ya', the inverse of this transformation seems to occur; the car as a modern commercial product becomes a medium for indigenous beliefs. This reflects the wider experience of Mexican road culture, that is dominated by popular religion. The majority of cars, trucks and buses carry images of Christ, *la virgen de Guadalupe* and other saints. (See photograph on following page) The icons draw upon the power of spiritual beliefs to protect the passengers from the technology of speed and violence embodied in the automobile.

That Antolín is collected by a transport vehicle reflects the popular Mexican belief that the dead embark upon a journey in the afterlife, a passage from one existence to another.<sup>47</sup> If this journey is to take place in a Ford automobile, the force of technology becomes active in the dimensions of the afterlife as well as the living world. This can occur because while there is a perceived division between worlds - often seen as a skin of some kind - the worlds of the living and the dead are inseparable. Indeed, Antolín tells the *cobradores* that the driver '-Nos trata como a fantasmas', inverting the assumption that it is the driver who is dead. Because there is no dichotomy of existence, no binary structure of body and soul, of matter and spirit, the car can be truly mobile - a vehicle that operates beyond spatiotemporal co-ordinates. Its body and machinery transform the space of 'death' as much as they alter the sense of 'life' in Chihuahuan society.

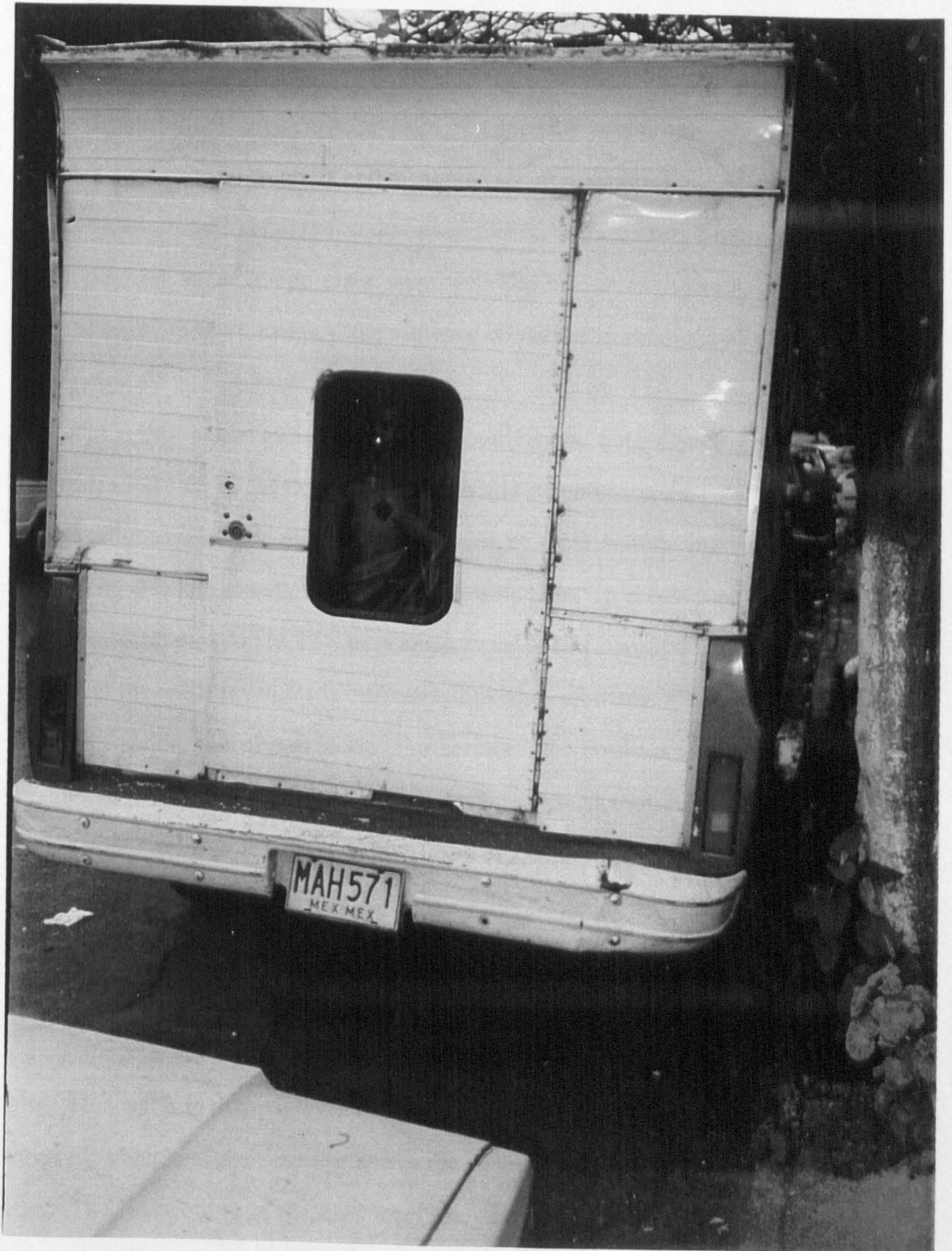
### Death and the Automobile

García Canclini calls for actions to:

Radicalizar el proyecto de la modernidad...renovar...crear nuevas posibilidades para que la modernidad pueda ser siempre otra cosa y otra más.<sup>48</sup>



An image of Christ displayed on a truck, Mexico City, 1994.





Canclini's appeal highlights the need to both resist the ideology behind the projects of modernization carried out by the State in Mexico in the name of 'progress' - the irrigation programme in Chihuahua - and to counter naive assumptions that modernization simply eradicates and replaces traditional pre-capitalist cultures. From this, he desires the radicalization of these projects by revealing the dynamic possibilities of cultural collision, in which new cultural symbols and meanings are generated - through the processes of transculturation and hybridization discussed above. However as Kraniauskas suggests, this is possibly an 'over-optimistic' approach that by-passes the extremes of suffering brought on by modernization - 'the violence contained in relations of exploitation and domination'.<sup>49</sup>

What Gardea achieves is perhaps a sensitivity to both Canclini's 'optimism' in modernization *and* to the threat it poses. While machines in *La canción de las mulas muertas* both transform, and are transformed by local culture, modernity becoming 'something else and something more', at the same time, 'en el fondo de las maravillas del Bar, lloraba un muerto.' (p.22) In 'Vámonos ya', while atavistic forces may be 'taking charge' of the car, the vehicle is intricately linked to economic misery under the shadow of credit finance, as analysed above. Furthermore, the Ford car is hardly an 'optimistic' medium of modernity; it brings terror and death, albeit in a transcultural form.

This threat extends across the wider body of Gardea's work and a pattern emerges. Whenever a car or a truck appears in the narrative, violence and death are imminent. So pervasive is this, that the automobile becomes a harbinger of death; *carros* and *camionetas*, the modern vehicles of fatality, murder and revenge. In 'Trinitario', a group of assassins use an old man's desire to sell his car to gain the opportunity to kill him. They get him to drive them deep into the *llano* to show the car's capabilities. He stops the vehicle at their request and in the desolate solitude of the plains they murder him. The functioning of the car's machinery is used by one of the assassins to put the man off his guard:

-Allí, fíjese...el agua, el radiador...



El viejo se inclinó. Pero entonces, los hombres, sin soltar el borde de sus capas, abrieron los brazos como alas y lo cubrieron.

-¿Y está carpa...? -fue todo lo que alcanzó a decir el viejo bajo la sombra roja, y antes de las balas. (p.51)

Earlier in the tale, the killers themselves are described as machines - 'Emitían, en la silenciosa mañana, un ruido de engranajes, como de muñecos montados en sendas plataformas mecánicas.' (p.42)

In *El diablo en el ojo*, a parked car is used by a group of men as the private space they require to plot a revenge killing. The car operates as a modern wrap-around-space, an armoured cloak of metal and glass against the larger society, from where the attack can be planned in a secluded and controlled zone without fear of spies. While the car's shell works as a repellent barrier in this way, at the same time it is porous to fluid spiritual entities - it is invaded by dead souls crying out for revenge against the murderer Borja, filling Ontiveros and his comrades with the desire to kill.<sup>50</sup>

In 'Pálido como el polvo', a boy, his uncle and a hired pugilist await the arrival of a group of men who are coming to settle a feud. They are situated at a deserted building in the heart of the *llano*, and the coming of violence and death can be seen from miles away in the clouds of dust thrown up by the enemy's vehicle as it approaches from the horizon. The pillar of dust expands ominously as 'Una cortina para confundirnos...', the enemy's truck tracing the sky with disturbed particles as it advances. (p.135) When the *camionetta* draws close, its engine dominates the sounds of the *llano* - the wind and the insects:

Nos llegaba el ruido por encima de los mezquites y por la boca del camino...Resonaba en la sombra del árbol, contra las paredes. Enmascaraba al zumbido del verano. (p.135)

The interruption of the car's engine silences the boy's uncle too, and 'En el silencio...yo sentí el miedo.' The machine's overpowering of human and animal sounds is disturbing



to the boy, a combined threat of the arriving men and their mechanical means. By this time, the pugilist has died of fear.

In *El agua de las esferas*, there are repeated references to a local junk yard, 'un cementerio de autos'. (p.52) As in the southern states of the USA, in Chihuahua 'the automobile graveyard [has become] a major feature of the American landscape.'<sup>51</sup> Gardea synthesizes the fragmented and collapsed forms of the cars with the characters' psychological states, the car's metallic 'deaths' penetrating their perceptions and consciousness.<sup>52</sup>

The wrecked hulls of crashed cars are elevated on pillars and plinths like trophies of war along the Pan-American highway in Chihuahua. They can be seen from miles away across the flat plains. Sometimes their purpose is to advertise repair services, at others there is an accompanied written warning to drive 'con cuidado'. They are continual and grotesque reminders of the violence of technology and speed on the 'open' highway, the distorted and fragmented metal forms becoming cultural mediums of death.

In Gardea's narratives, the myth of the automobile as 'the false idealisation of freedom defined as mobility'<sup>53</sup> - which is by no means limited to the USA - is shattered. Car space is a trap, a constraint to the motoricity of the human body. In the autobiographical novel *El sol que estás mirando*, the father of the boy David, dies in the claustrophobic space and asphyxiating air of a car on the way to hospital: in *Los músicos y el fuego*, the musicians' truck is set alight by their enemies, burning them alive: in 'En la caliente boca de la noche', a man's car is invaded by stinging insects. The attack occurs as soon as he attempts to drive - 'Cuando doy vuelta al volante, siento el dolor agudo de un piquete en la nuca.' (p.101)



A junk yard or 'automobile graveyard' on the Pan-American Highway, central Chihuahua.





## Notes

1. García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas*, p.15.
2. As Plutarco Elías Calles once put it - 'Our heavy industry is agriculture.' Quoted by Jean Meyer, 'Revolution and reconstruction in the 1920s, p.238.
3. The surface area covered by *Riego 05* was intended to be immense. Recent figures suggest the system irrigates 62,734 hectares. The water comes from three sources - the dams of *la Boquilla* that irrigates some 27,667 hectares., *Francisco I Madero*, known as *las Virgenes* (33,282 hectares) and underground springs (1,784 hectares). Data from Muñiz, *Estudio económico sobre la región de Delicias, Chihuahua: La necesidad de organizar y planear su actividad*, p.39.
4. Aboites Aguilar, *La Irrigación revolucionaria*, p.23.
5. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p.38.
6. Aboites Aguilar, p.9.
7. Aboites Aguilar, p.52.
8. Aboites Aguilar, p.11.
9. Document in *Agua y tierra en la región de Conchos - San Pedro, Chihuahua 1720-1938: Fuentes para una historia agraria*, ed. Aboites Aguilar, p. 166.
10. Canclini, p.20.
11. Aboites Aguilar, p.52.
12. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, p. 42.
13. This simultaneity in Delicias/Placeres reflects the historical position of Chihuahua in relation to the central government. Chihuahuans have always maintained a fierce sense of regionalism and separatism from the State, (see Orozco, *Chihuahua: Sociedad, Economía, Política y Cultura*, chapter V.) However, Ciudad Delicias and *Riego 05* are material evidence of State power in the once isolated north.
14. Canclini, p.20.
15. The bar got its name from a brand of mineral water, *Topo Chico*, produced to this day in Monterrey.
16. In *Crowds and Power*, Canetti traces the historical shift from teeth, to stone, to metal tools suggesting that 'smoothness' brings functional order. 'Smoothness and order, the manifest attributes of the teeth, have entered into the very nature of power. They are inseparable from it and, in every manifestation of power, they are the first things to be established...The real attraction of metal lies in the fact that it is smoother than anything else. In the machines and vehicles of the contemporary world smoothness has increased and has also become smoothness of performance. Language expresses this very simply; we say 'everything is going smoothly' or 'functions smoothly'; and we mean by this that some process is completely and undisturbedly within our power... Today smoothness has conquered our houses, their walls and all the objects we put into them...We speak of function, clarity of line and utility, but what has really triumphed is smoothness, and the prestige of the power it conceals.' (p.243)
17. See Luis Aboites Aguilar, '¿De dónde llegaron los que llegaron a Delicias, Chihuahua?'
18. There are echoes here of both Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, and García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, in the former as the lust for power is a destructive force that devastates an entire community, and in the latter in the use of the narrative position of the character at the tale's end.
19. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.385.
20. The nearest river source is the *San Pedro*, some 4km from Delicias.
21. Bataille's theory of 'General Economy' is illuminating in this, when he comments that, 'life suffocates within limits that are too close; it aspires in manifold ways to an impossible growth; it releases a steady flow of excess resources, possibly involving large squanderings of energy.' (Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p.30.) While Bataille writes from the experience of the soaring European industrialisation that erupted in the surplus excess of the two world wars, Gardea's work is tied to the Mexican experience



of industrial growth since the 1940s, and its effects on rural communities. In Placeres, there is a battle between two modernising agents, Vargas and Góngora whose surpluses of drink and capital explode in covert and overt forms of warfare. The sense of claustrophobia in the tale, evoked by the heat of the sun, intensifies this explosive feeling, for an explosion relies upon a confined and sealed space, like a bottle, from which to burst forth. Placeres, is like one of Vargas' bottles of drink; it is pumped up with the forces of modernity, a container that is claustrophobic in its isolation and closed boundaries, yet constantly on the brink of discharging surplus energy.

22. Marx, *Grundrisse*, p.143.

23. A friend of Gardea's father used to own such a machine in the 1940s. Gardea would watch him operate it, fascinated as a child by its mechanical functions and the process of producing the *refrescos*, which the man sold for 15 centavos. In the 1950s, the US soda drink giants *Coca-Cola* and *Pepsi-Cola* opened factories in Delicias, and the *embotelladora* became increasingly redundant.

24. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.11.

25. Peter Osborne, 'Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological, category.'

26. Canclini, p.13.

27. José Agustín, *Tragicomedia Mexicana 1: La vida en México de 1940 a 1970*, p.98.

28. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.ix.

29. Marta Turok et. al., *Diagnóstico sociocultural del estado de Chihuahua*, p.100.

30. Interview between Hinchliffe and Gardea, September 1993.

31. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilisation*, p.10.

32. This idea of the forces as a vector, was suggested by William Rowe.

33. Mottram, *Blood on the Nash Ambassador*, p.48.

34. When I questioned Gardea on his attitude towards technology, he cited John Ludd and commented, 'yo soy un poco así como un ludista...' Interview between Hinchliffe and Gardea, September 1993.

35. This resistance to the television is strong in certain elements of Chihuahuan society, who blame it and other electronic media for the current decline in regional cultures. The bombarding of images from the USA and central Mexico are perceived as violent penetrations of alien subcultures. In the words of Turok et al, 'Los modernos conquistadores...la TV, el cine y la radio...', give the youth of Chihuahua 'una visión falsa de la realidad que los rodea.' (p.101 and p.94)

36. Canclini, p.14.

37. Canclini, p.15.

38. It was at General Motors in the 1920s that the concept of consumer installment credit was pioneered. See Eric Mottram, *Blood on the Nash Ambassador*, p.57.

39. In the contract, there are also echoes of Goethe's Faust, that Marshall Berman analyses in relation to the revolutionary turbulence of socio-economic change in 18th century Europe. Both Antolín and Faust are caught up in a relationship between the developments of the 'modern' world and the spirit world, that take the form of a fatal contract.

40. Eric Mottram, quoting Gerry Thorley, Chrysler's designer in charge of colour. Mottram, p.55.

41. Rowe and Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America*, p.231.

42. Canclini, *Las culturas populares en el capitalismo*.

43. See Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: the Impact of Diabolism in New Spain*, p.57.

44. Canclini, *Culturas híbridas*, p.71. For Canclini, these three historical temporalities comprise the Latin American coordinates of modernity, in contrast to those which Perry Anderson suggests for Europe: a) the academicism and elitism of the arts; b) the emergence of technologies from the second industrial revolution (the telephone, the automobile, the radio); c) The imaginative proximity of social revolution manifested in Russia.



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45. The conviction in the physicality of dead souls persists in Mexican popular culture despite the attempts of Catholic priests over the centuries, to force the Christian concept of the spirit as a non-corporeal entity onto the population. Such an abstraction could not be comprehended or assimilated into indigenous religious beliefs at the time of the conquest and remains ineffectual in rural areas to the present day. (See Hugo Nutini, *Todos Santos in Rural Tlaxcala*, p.340.) In contemporary society, the practice of leaving food for the returning souls on *Todos Santos* as sustenance for their needy bodies is the most obvious continuation of this. (See chapter five of this thesis)
46. This is different to the concept of 'the ghost in the machine', because death is a tactile entity, with physical control over the mechanical object, not some arbitrary glitch in the machines functioning.
47. In central and southern Mexico the destination of the journey of death depended on how a person died. Warriors and women who died in childbirth ascended to be united with the sun. Those who were killed by lightning, leprosy or dropsy went to *Tlalocan*, 'place of delight'. All others travelled to the mythical underworld of *Mictlán*, the ninth of the infra-worlds, ruled by the 'partially fleshless' *Mictlantecuhli*. In northern Mexico, while less structured, there was a similarly powerful belief that a dead person's soul embarked upon a journey to the afterlife, often at the behest of *La Muerte*. (See *La Muerte: expresiones Mexicanas de un enigma*, Museo Universitario, UNAM, 1974)
48. Canclini, *Culturas híbridas*, p.333.
49. John Kraniauskas, 'Hybridism and Reterritorialization', p.149.
50. The vengeful spirit is common in Mexican spiritual beliefs. The dead spirit returns to avenge those that mistreated them when they were 'alive' - 'They appear as phantoms, nebulous apparitions, and repellent animals, and they play tricks and sometimes cause serious damage.' Nutini, p.312.
51. Mottram, p.42.
52. Moy is exposed to the combined impact of light, fear and piles of decaying cars at the junk yard: 'El silencio adentro me permitía oír cómo el sol, en los bordes del horizonte, trizaba al papel. El mundo alrededor estaba envuelto en esta lluvia, niebla de coruscantes. Cubría la lluvia el cementerio de autos, el cascarón del autobús, el detenido oleaje de láminas y cristales que lo rodeaba como a una isla. Las trizaduras, a la una de la tarde abundantes, borran la copia de autos abandonados.' (p.52)
53. Mottram, p.43.



## TWO

### Space, Power and Time

We think too much in terms of history, whether personal or universal. Becomings belong to geography, they are orientations, directions, entries and exits.

Deleuze and Parnet<sup>1</sup>

Michel Foucault once said that 'A whole history remains to be written of spaces - which at the same time would be the history of powers.'<sup>2</sup> His statement suggests the need for a radical break from the methods of conventional historiography, particularly its separation of socio-economic and political history from geography. It demands methods of analysis that are sensitive to the close historical connections that exist between geography and politics - the relationship between space, power and culture.

In the creation of Gardea's birth place Ciudad Delicias, the presence of this relationship is overwhelming. The Mexican State selected the site for the construction of the town in the heart of the Chihuahuan *llano*, a region of low population density - approximately two people per km<sup>2</sup> - located hundreds of miles from the nearest major city.<sup>3</sup> The area seemed to offer an isolated and empty space, devoid of history - a social and cultural vacuum to be filled and realigned with the institutions of the nation-state. In this way, the *llano* was conceived as a blank recording surface for the political projects of central government, an open plane upon which State history could be inscribed. From its architecture, to its street plan and territorial position, Delicias became a monument of State power and political ambition.



This chapter begins as an attempt to respond to Foucault's demands. It examines the construction of Delicias, analysing the spatial politics of the city's creation - how the 'blank' space of the *llano* is filled with symbols of national modernity and State power. But it then shifts to the spatial relationship between Delicias and Gardea's Placeres, in which the geographic dimensions of the 'real' town are transmuted to the 'imaginary'. In the process, quite different histories of space emerge. Non-human forces of the *llano* (wind, light, dust) and spiritual events (the actions of dead souls), begin to transform the spatial dimensions of the town, upsetting its linear organization and geometric functionality. No longer controlled by the vision of the urban planners, the buildings, streets and landscape of Placeres become an unstable and dangerous place. As the shift occurs, space is liberated from the geo-political hegemony of the central State, marking an intervention by Gardea - perhaps unwittingly - in the spatial politics of central Chihuahua. Placeres simultaneously exposes the fragility of this hegemony and imagines a radical alternative, transforming historical relationships of space and power.

### ***Riego 05 : the Invention of Ciudad Delicias***

There is simply no room left for 'freedom from the tyranny of government' since city dwellers depend on it for food, power, water, transportation, protection and welfare.

William Burroughs<sup>4</sup>

The geographic organization of public space in Delicias was meticulously planned along socio-economic and political lines. While the physical construction of the town began in 1933, its conceptual invention began as early as 1920 with the plans for a vast irrigation network in the region of *los Conchos*, central Chihuahua. General Ignacio C.



Enríquez - who became the first Gobernador Constitucionalista de Chihuahua - desired an irrigation project in the region to bring agricultural and economic productivity to 'los campos...desiertos, los pueblos casi deshabitados', in the wake of the Revolution and the activities of Pancho Villa in Chihuahua.<sup>5</sup> However, it was not until the support of the Comisión Nacional de Irrigación, founded by the Calles administration in 1925, that the project gathered momentum. Enríquez passed the planning of the scheme to his engineer brother Benjamin, who was sent by Calles with a team of experts to the USA to learn dam construction techniques. In conjunction with vast dam systems, the irrigation network would supply water for agriculture and hydroelectricity throughout the region. By 1930, in collaboration with the anglo-american company The White Engineering Corporation, work on the irrigation systems finally began.

An agricultural work force that would supply a stable and secure source of labour was a crucial component of the mechanical oasis that Enríquez and Calles had envisaged. A new city had to be invented; a containing space to house such a work force, colonists that would arrive from destinations throughout Mexico.<sup>6</sup> It would need to provide the social fabric of their lives - housing, health, education, civil society and political structure - thereby stimulating their economic productivity. This productivity was paramount in the conceptual philosophy of the planners. In the rhetoric of the Rotary Club's celebration of the 50th anniversary of Delicias, the *colonos* was mythically conceived of as a tool of production - '(el) hombre en su plenitud humana: como objetivo productor...'<sup>7</sup> He or she would become a functional tool, a moving part in the concept of the city as a manufacturing machine. This was symbolically instituted by Delicias' coat of arms (see illustration on following page). *Trabajo*, *Lealtad* and *Constancia* form a linguistic border, a trinity of linguistic signifiers around the symbolic items of produce, the industrial chimney and the agricultural field. Together they serve an iconic purpose, operating between the visual and verbal fields, the shield forming an emblematic stamp for the identity of the town. The words are performative actions, social impositions of power, orders to the populace of Delicias to obey, to conform to and identify with the prescribed sentiments of its pseudo-religious creation process; the pictures, signs of



The coat of arms of Ciudad Delicias.



ESCUDO DE CD. DELICIAS

Cortesía de "LA PROVINCIAL " Cia. General de Seguros.



Mexican modernisation through agroindustrial output. This invented identity for the new town was imposed by the political and economic leaders of Delicias and was violently signified in the symbols of the coat of arms. Furthermore, this identity was sanctioned by the Chihuahuan state government, who published the Rotary Club's celebratory book *Delicias: 50 Años*. An ends-means scenario of labour to agricultural and industrial produce was engendered, a 'guiding' principle to stimulate the inhabitants. In the words of the Rotary Club:

De ese amor al trabajo, de ese amor a México,  
nacío...CIUDAD DELICIAS.<sup>8</sup>

The town's architecture, its design and physical form, had to both reflect and promote these ideals, that bound the liberal-capitalist work ethic to the 'progressive' desires of the post-revolutionary nation-state. The invention of such a city came from Ing. D. Carlos G. Blake, celebrated as the 'creador y fundador de nuestra CIUDAD DELICIAS.' While the 'creative' idea was Blake's, 'el desarrollo y dibujo de los planos fué obra del Ing. Pedro Alvarez...' <sup>9</sup> Together they built Delicias, beginning in 1933, as a late appendage to the modernization and urban development programmes initiated by Calles, which had included projects of 'Irrigación Revolucionaria' to develop the arid northern states.<sup>10</sup>

The creation of Delicias and *Riego 05* was designed to fulfil the post-revolutionary agenda to modernize the nation-state, to capitalize on its resources and use technological advances such as dams and irrigation to convert what was literally seen as waste land into productive sites. Thus, the full weight of Mexico's recent political agenda from Obregón to the interim president Abelardo L. Rodríguez was banked up behind Blake, who transferred it into physical form in Delicias. A political design penetrates to the very bones of the town; it is etched along the skeletal structure of its roads and buildings.



## The Social Production of Space: Landscape and Architecture

The political power of the State is polis, police, that is, management of the public ways...

Paul Virilio<sup>11</sup>

The location chosen for the new town of Delicias was the site of an old *hacienda*, from which the town takes its name. As the site was void of buildings and infrastructure, the developers were confronted with what they considered a 'blank sheet', on which to design and map the town as they saw fit. Indeed, the entire *antiplano* region was viewed in this way, as the nomadic and semi-nomadic indigenous peoples that had inhabited the region for centuries before the Conquest - conchos, pimas, guarijios, apaches and tepehuanos - had not constructed permanent settlements and left neither buildings made of stone, nor political hierarchies and systems of organised labour and agriculture. This had initially created an impasse to Spanish colonization and sovereignty as it denied the invaders ready built socio-political structures that could be appropriated and transformed to fit their own designs. This kind of hegemonic process had been highly effective in southern and central Mexico but was impossible to implement in Chihuahua:

Aquí...no existían adoratorios, ni pueblos y menos ciudades o sistemas de organización que conquistar, destruir y sustituir por los versiones europeas.<sup>12</sup>

For Blake and Alvarez however, this freedom from the constructs of older civilizations combined with an absence of colonial Spanish planning, engineering and architecture, seemed to offer a unique opportunity to imprint Delicias with the progressive modernization that the State desired, through the management of space. But to achieve this, and inherent within the Mexican State's wider 'progressive' goals, they first had to conquer and control the hostile environment of the *llanos* of Chihuahua, the geography and climate of which had shaped the region's history since the Conquest. Once 'tamed',



the *llano* could become a recording surface for the political projects of central government, a plane upon which State history could be inscribed.

The site chosen for Delicias was at the heart of the *altiplano* strip, with an altitude of over 1000 metres above sea level and an adverse climate:

El clima es extremoso en invierno y verano: semiárido de aire reseco y caliente, y de lluvias deficientes en las mismas dos estaciones.<sup>13</sup>

Temperatures in the region range from a maximum of 40°C in the summer months to minus 15°C in the winter, the landscape alternating between scorched *llano* and impassable *nevada*. The terrain of the *altiplano* is barren and infertile as a consequence, the vegetation limited to *matorales* and *mezquites*. Deleuze and Guattari describe such terrain - like the sea and the forest - as 'smooth space': areas not yet striated by sedentary existence. As such, they threaten State hegemony. Thus:

One of the fundamental tasks of the State is to striate the space over which it reigns, or to utilize smooth space as a means of communication in the service of striated space.<sup>14</sup>

To incorporate the 'smooth space' of the *llano* into the national body was a crucial act for Mexico's 'progress' as a geo-political power. However, the geophysical hostility and the sheer expanse of the *llano* had prevented intensive colonization for centuries after the arrival of invading Spanish forces, led by Cabeza de Vaca in 1530. For the next two hundred years, the only material signs of Hispanic sovereignty on the plains were isolated military and religious outposts - *presidios* and missionary enclaves. While these became supplemented in time by mines and prisons, and while cities such as Juárez, began to develop in the central corridor and the river valleys, there remained thousands of square miles of land occupied only by indigenous nomadic populations. Colonization was further hindered by the distance between Chihuahua and Mexico City. Before the construction of the railroad from México D.F. to El Paso in 1884, it took up to six months to travel from the capital to the northern state. Chihuahua's culture continued to



develop in social and political isolation from the central State until the Revolution, when it became more fully integrated into the national body through the political ambitions and military power of the northern revolutionaries.

By the 1930s, with new modes of production and technology available, Calles (himself a northerner) set about transforming the 'wasteland' into productive and colonised sites for the economic benefit of the entire nation. For the developer and coloniser alike, the *llano* became an environmental war zone:

Su punto de partida y su meta final, era vencer al desierto, conquistar el páramo, fertilizar el yermo. Y el yermo, el páramo y el desierto, ante aquel haz de voluntades, ante aquel firme deseo inquebrantable de trabajo, se transformó en la maravillosa acuarela de esmeralda pintada con el verde de nuestros algodones, de nuestros viñedos y alfalfaes...<sup>15</sup>

This description of 'painting' the hostile and infertile landscape of Chihuahua with the green vegetation of cash crops such as cotton, is an attempt at the ritualistic domination of non-human 'waste' land by human productivity. It involves the imposition by the Rotary Club of a pastoral metaphor, in which the land becomes synonymous with human will, control and possession. The landscape is violently 'humanised' by the metaphors of war, conquest and pacification - 'vencer al desierto, conquistar el páramo, fertilizar el yermo'. At the same time, the human order becomes 'naturalised' in its interaction with the landscape through 'natural' products such as cotton. The rhetoric and metaphors signify the construction of a mental space around Delicias, with its own metalanguage.

The metalinguistic process continues in a description of Ing. Blake as an artist expressing himself on the open 'canvas' of the plains:

La llanura inmensa, semidesértica, impresionante, fue el lienzo donde el Ing. Carlos G. Blake plasmara los imperativos anhelos de su imaginación.<sup>16</sup>

But while Blake was immortalised by these words, as a God-like creator figure, marking the landscape with his desire, his true function in Delicias was as an agent of control.

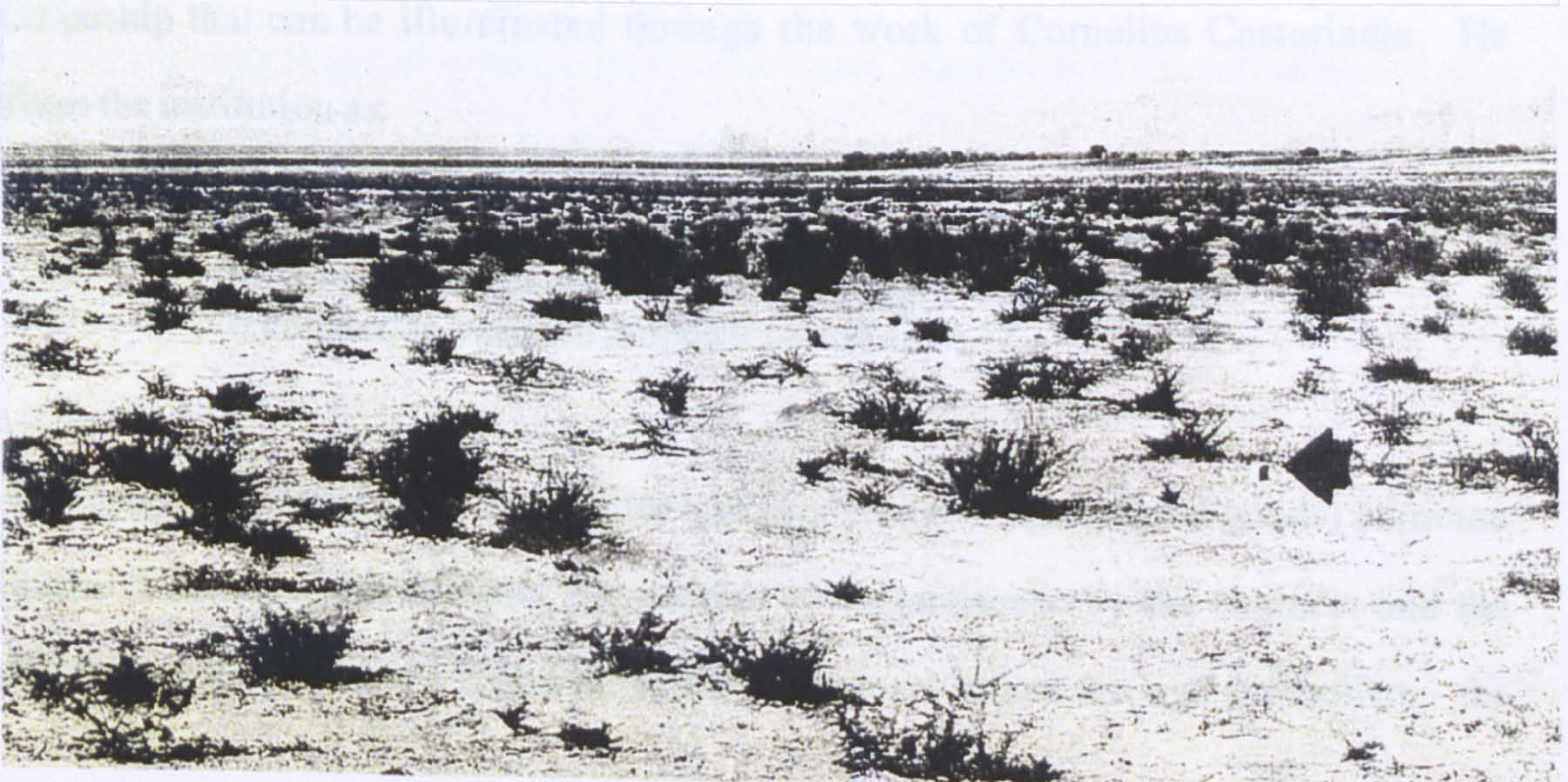


Above - the green belt of agricultural fertility surrounding Delicias in the 1990s, generated by the water of *Riego 05*.

Below - in contrast, the site of Delicias in the early 1930s, prior to the irrigation project. (Photograph and text from the Rotary Club's *Ciudad Delicias: xxv aniversario*.)



*Foto realmente histórica. En éstos terrenos yermos, desérticos, un puñado de hombres decididos vislumbrando un porvenir de progreso patrio empezaron a levantar lo que es hoy toda una realidad, brillante Cd. Delicias. Obsérvese el hito marcado con la flecha que corresponde hoy a la estación de ferrocarril.*





Firstly, in the way that he himself was directed as an instrument of the State, employed to realize its blueprint for modernization, and secondly in his manipulation and organization of space, which amounted to the control of the people that would reside in it:

Se trataba no sólo de diseñar el ámbito físico de los primeros pobladores, sino también, y sobre todo, de imprimir a éste el clima espiritual adecuado para una generación que llegaba esperanzada a incorporar a la producción una tierra generosa.<sup>17</sup>

This mythification of Blake as not only the designer of the physical dimensions of Delicias but the creator of its 'spiritual climate', echoes the cult celebration of engineers in 19th century philosophy and art as 'priest[s] of civilization'. Paul Virilio states that this may seem a 'perverted image', but it appeared 'quite naturally after that of the "castrameter" - the latter really a priest or man of the Church assigned to teach the art of limiting camps and fortified places by geometrical layouts.'<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Blake's role as a planner came at the conjuncture of physical and quasi-spiritual creation: to develop both the physical field of Delicias - its buildings and roads - and the 'spirit' that would stimulate the town's economic production. As a 'priest of civilization', he engaged in the social, spiritual and mythical production of space.

Blake's role - like that of a priest - was inseparable from institutional powers, a relationship that can be illuminated through the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. He defines the institution as:

a socially sanctioned, symbolic network in which a functional component and an imaginary component are combined in variable proportions and sizes.<sup>19</sup>

In Delicias, components of functionality (the production of agricultural goods) combine with the imaginary (the 'spiritual' domination of the landscape by the engineer and the mythic worker) to create a social institution. They are joined through symbolism - the



metalanguage of the Rotary Club, the icons on the coat of arms - becoming a symbolic network, linking the social imaginary and the economic-functional elements of Delicias.

If the institution is approached in this way, it becomes clear that the relationship between Delicias and Placeres is far more complex than a polemical opposition of 'physical' and 'imaginary' spaces. Indeed, the site of Delicias becomes as imagined as that of Placeres. As Castoriadis continues:

Beyond the conscious activity of institutionalization, institutions have drawn their source from the *social imaginary*. This imaginary must be interwoven with the symbolic, otherwise society could not have 'come together'; and have linked up with the economic-functional component, otherwise it could not have survived. (p.131)

The relationship between the imaginary, the symbolic and the economic-functional continues in the design of the street plan of Delicias. Blake and Alvarez constructed Delicias on a rigid and symmetrical grid pattern, originally basing its shape on the street plan of Washington DC. In the process, the *llano* was systematized by the codes of linear perspective in urban planning, becoming a concrete mesh organized along parallel, symmetrical and right-angled axes and planes. Linear perspective developed out of the Italian Renaissance of the 15th Century through philosophical and artistic practices that projected 'mathematically ordered systematic space, infinite, homogenous, and isotropic...' <sup>20</sup> This brought a radical cultural transformation of space, generating what Panofsky calls the 'logic of visualisation', which was transferred to the urban landscape, especially in the New World, in the form of the rectilinear grid.

The grid has an extensive history in Mexico. In 1573 the Spanish authorities established a code of urban space in the 'Orders for Discovery and Settlement' for the founders of new towns. The code enforced the grid system, which became the official model for the geographic design of new towns from the Colonial period to the 20th century. The colonial powers believed the grid would supply a spatial framework to order the populations of the towns and control their socio-economic behaviour. As



Virilio puts it, 'Geometry is the necessary foundation for a calculated expansion of State power in space and time...'<sup>21</sup>

The hierarchical organization of space was central to the concept of the grid, a rationale described by Henri Lefebvre:

In order to dominate space, technology introduces a new form into a pre-existing space - generally a rectilinear or rectangular form such as a meshwork or chequerwork.<sup>22</sup>

The polis became a machinic grid, an instrument of production, whose homogenised spatial form allowed the extraction of its economic wealth by its architects, the colonial power. As Lefebvre states, 'it is almost as though the riches produced were riddled out through the gaps in the grid.'<sup>23</sup> In Delicias in the 1930s, the relationship continued, the town becoming a 20th century political and economic colony of México D.F.. It was channelled and striated by Blake and Alvarez with geometrical precision, transferring the State's linear and sequential modes of logic into a physical and functional reality. In this way, the architecture was conceived to control the people that lived within its parameters; their daily routines and spatial existence mapped out and channelled by its designs. This was an exercise of power-geometry by the urban planners of Delicias - the mastering of social space and human geographies through the structural imposition of roads and buildings.

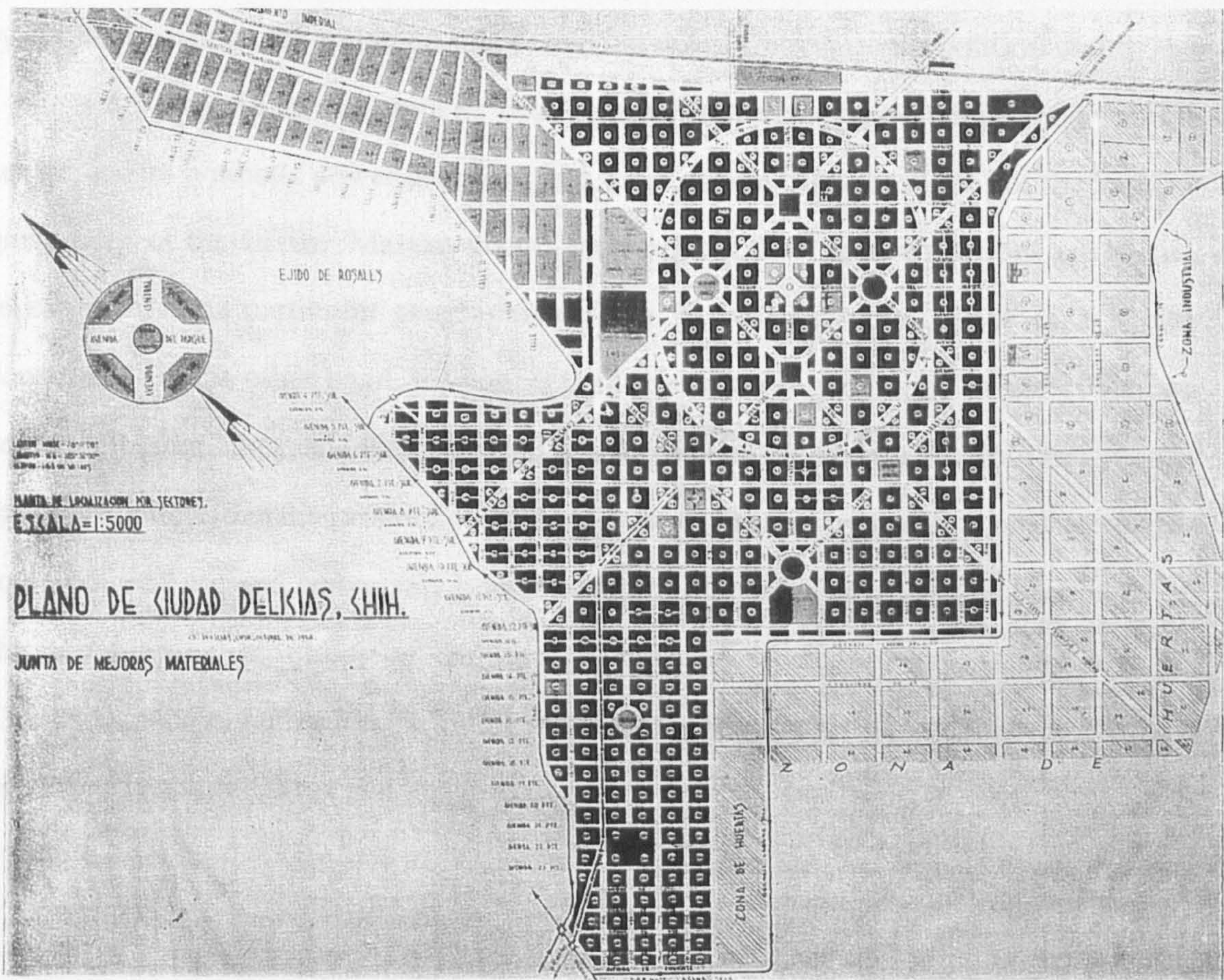
In Delicias, the grid was organized around a central clock-tower, on a roundabout at the very heart of the town. The shape of the plan is symbolic of a clock face, from which four roads spring like clock hands at the hours of 3,6,9 and 12 o'clock. The desire for 'modern', homogeneous time is overbearing in this geometric street plan that operates around the celebration and functionalism of chronometric time:

El reloj es el centro geográfico de la ciudad.

De ahí parten las vías públicas que dividen a Delicias en cuatro sectores. Pero no sólo eso, allí palpita el corazón que da vida y alimenta al diario acontecer de una vasta región agrícola.<sup>24</sup>



Street plan of Delicias. The clock tower is situated at the very centre of the grid.





As Lefebvre puts it, 'The State crushes time by reducing differences to repetitions or circularities...'<sup>25</sup> Through the grid and the public chronometer and the force of their symbolic mediation, the architects transferred the site of Delicias to the political realm.

The street plan of Delicias, with its 'beating heart' in the clock-tower at its geographical centre, and its symbolic power over time and space, exemplifies the claims of the 'radical geography' of the 1970s. Marxist geographers argued that spatial relations are 'social relations taking a particular geographical form.'<sup>26</sup> In this way, space is a social construct. On the other hand, the concepts of the cultural geography of the 1980s are equally pressing - they add that the social is spatially constructed too.<sup>27</sup> In other words, space is implicated in the production of history, both in the way that it is engineered for socio-political use and conversely how the control of space can manipulate society. In the geographical moulding of Delicias, Blake and Alvarez were shaping history. Through spatial organization they were planning the very 'spirit' of Delicias, exercising a politics of space and the social imaginary.

### Power-geometry

Perception does not give me truths like geometry but presences...it reveals another modality which is neither the ideal and necessary being of geometry nor the simple sensory event...

Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>28</sup>

In the creation of Placeres, Gardea engages in the politics of space. His writing is not just the production of a text, but of spatial textures, *archi-textures*, which transgress the functions of space outlined by Blake and the State planners, liberating its geography. The liberation occurs through the exploration in Placeres of the pathology of urban space - the integral fragility of State produced geographies that would appear to be virtually



indestructible. While the architects, urbanists and planners - in Lefebvre's terms, the 'doctors of space' - sought a politically motivated functionality in the body of the town, Gardea introduces uncontrollable viruses, promoting spatial 'disease', decay and collapse. In Placeres, a poetic geography appropriates the 'reality' of the streets and buildings, eroding the fixed network of symbolic structures - the clock tower, the grid, the language of pastoral metaphors - transforming the political agenda of Delicias:

Los auxilios, como las chispas, habían cesado en el cielo.  
Un crepúsculo enorme y silencioso echó abajo los puentes,  
el rojo que aún persistía. La cal de las casas, la tierra del  
llano, y la figura de Gil, se volvieron azules.<sup>29</sup>

Gardea mutates the grid of Delicias to the imaginary town of Placeres, where it continues to 'produce' space and influence the geographic experiences of the inhabitants. Descriptions of movement through the town follow its lines. In *El sol que estás mirando*, David describes walking with his father across the town - 'A las dos cuadras de nuestra tienda abandonamos la calle para tomar otra, lateral.' (p.38) Yet, descriptions of street movement of this kind are rare. The grid and its visual logic is constantly being broken apart by forces of the *llano* - light, heat, wind and dust - that the planners sought to banish from the town. Instead of being marginalized from the site and conquered by urban landscape technologies, they dominate the town and its inhabitants. In *El tornavoz*, Vitelo gazes at a house measured at a distance of six blocks down the street, but while his vision is framed by the visual logic of the streets, it is obscured by light intensity:

Estaba denso el sol. Y la mirada de Vitelo se quebró en el  
bloque de luz maciza que llenaba y aplastaba la calle.  
(p.25)

In the collision between Vitelo's sight and the 'block' of light, it becomes clear that space is not 'an empty and neutral milieu occupied by dead objects but...a field of force full of tensions and distortions.'<sup>30</sup> This contrasts with the desire of planners such as Blake, to



create 'a homogeneous, clearly demarcated space complete with horizon and vanishing-point'.<sup>31</sup> For rather than conceiving space by reducing visual perception to a single point on the horizon - formed when parallel lines seen in perspective converge in the distance - Vitelo interacts with the very energy (solar) that gives space its visual form. In doing so, he is interacting with space, for as Lefebvre crucially states, 'physical space has no "reality" without the energy that is deployed within it'.<sup>32</sup>

In this sense of space as energy, as 'a field of force', Gardea designs Placeres. He counters both the concept of space as empty or redundant until filled by man made objects (human will), and the naive supposition that space is a purely ocular experience, controlled by multiple symbolic markers. Rather than setting up an alternative set of spatial symbols, counter-symbols with their own set of obediences, Gardea overturns the whole concept. He generates a radical philosophy of space which is non-symbolic and asignifying - space for the inhabitants of Placeres is produced by flows of energy, in contrast to being signified by the controlling networks of symbol and metaphor construed by the Rotary Club and the State.

As a 'modern' town, Delicias was built around a network of roads, whose width and expanse dominate the landscape. The intention was to assist the free movement of commercial transportation and create expansive 'pathways... (to)...facilitate the exchange of material things and information'.<sup>33</sup> Yet, the dimensions of the roads - the majority of which were little more than compressed mud - became huge expanses of dust, free flowing channels for the energized passage of its particles from the *llano*. It was not until the mid 1950s, that the main roads were tarmacked, and many subsidiary streets have remained unsurfaced to the present day.

In *El agua de las esferas*, the dense air of the plains penetrates the town:

El aire de la ciudad era un enorme erial. Ganaba espacio el desierto, penetraba en los domicilios; por cientos de miles rendia nuestras plazas fuertes. (p.92)



As dust, air and bodies interact on the street, other kinds of information - non-commercial - start to move, congesting the information lattices of the grid with alternative networks of force/communication. In *El tornavoz*, Vitelo watches a group of men walking in the street:

Iban como arropados por el polvo y el aire caliente, que les impedía la franca respiración y les velaba las cosas. (p.26)

As it coats and transforms all physical structures and forms, the dust disrupts the functioning of the human body, disabling the organs of sight and breathing: it becomes a suffocating and intoxicating 'segunda piel' (p.74) and the 'perfect' geometry of the straight roads that carry it become freeways for its movement. The dust is white and settles on the town like snow. Placeres becomes a *nevada* of dust, a snow field that brings a muffled silence to the streets. Its whiteness reflects the powerful Chihuahuan sun, a blinding field of light.

In the short story 'Hombre solo', from the collection *Los viernes de Lautaro*, the force of dust winds trap the old man Zamudio in his house. He will not leave the protection of the building until the dust settles, fearing its impact on the soft tissue of his body:

Los remolinos de polvo de la calle vienen a estrellarse contra el esprín de la puerta, a cernirse allí. Zamudio encoje las piernas: el polvo blanco, su contacto, siente que le daña: ha visto la obra del polvo, empujado por el viento, en la corteza de sus árboles. (p.21/22)

This erosion of physical forms by moving particles of dust, alters both the landscape of the town - its buildings, monuments, institutions, roads - and the shape of its inhabitants' bodies and movements.

The assault intensifies with the twisting clouds of dust, the *tolvaneras* and *torbellinos* of Spring and autumn that transform spatiotemporal perceptions in Placeres:



El tiempo de Placeres, abundancia de remolinos. Días, horas, dormidos trompos. Tanto girar en la serenidad, una sola, lenta vuelta. Pero los remolinos engañan. Carcomen el mundo, desgastan la tela del alma.<sup>34</sup>

The force is no longer confined to the 'natural' world; it is not merely transforming the physical planes of Placeres, but the entire field of the town's imaginary and spiritual dimensions. In *Los músicos y el fuego* there is a warning that an advancing whirlwind will consume everything in its path - 'El torbellino que come nubes, flores, comerá, también, almas.' (p.65.)

The architecture of Delicias mirrors the grid efficiency of the streets. The majority of buildings are symmetric cuboids with little variation in terms of shape and size, and neatly line the straight roads - paradigms of a planned and produced social space. Yet, the buildings that comprise the commercial centre of town - which is formed around the squat Mercado Juárez - are invariably low. Most are between one and three stories high, with flat roofs and a structure of box-like simplicity. The effect that this has is to allow the sky to dominate the visual panorama/perspective of the person in the street. (Compare the urban landscape of Delicias to that of El Paso on the following page.) Because buildings in Delicias barely impose upon the sky, the urban landscape becomes subordinated to a wider visual field, including events that pass by overhead - the movements and physical presence of the sun, moon, constellations and clouds, and the colours, haze, light and shadow that these sources of light project. This phenomenon of a dynamic skyscape intensifies in the imaginary Placeres. In *La canción de las mulas muertas*, Gil walks the streets:

Gil caminaba a la estación, mirando casi constantemente el cielo, poco a la tierra, el camino conocido. Era como un hombre atento a una lámpara parpadeando... (p.97)



Above - Ciudad Delicias.

Below - El Paso, USA.





The sky is his physical and psychological aid, the terrain of his visual perspective, not the concrete and material objects around him nor the multiple symbols of clock and grid system.

The 'clock-hand' roads that provide long, straight and broad passages to and from the heart of Delicias, were intended to be commercial thoroughfares, organized by the symbolic clock as the pointer to progressive efficiency. While the width and the precise, geometrically straight lines of these roads were built to ease commercial traffic flow, they have aided rather than thwarted the spatial predominance of sky over city (see the photographs on the following pages of Delicias in both the 1940s and the 1990s). In the absence of curves for the eye to follow, the gaze is directed toward horizons and sky. Street perspectives are framed in long, seemingly infinite horizons, inviting the light forces of the sky to dominate the visual scene, through day and night. This translates to Gardea's narratives in which skywatching is a common pursuit. In the short story 'Está vivo', from the collection *Las luces del mundo*, a boy describes how his uncle passes the time:

Amigo del silencio mi tío y del quedarse mirando el aire las horas enteras. Busca las ventanas para hacerlo. Y las horas que mira las que pasan por el cielo. (p.103)

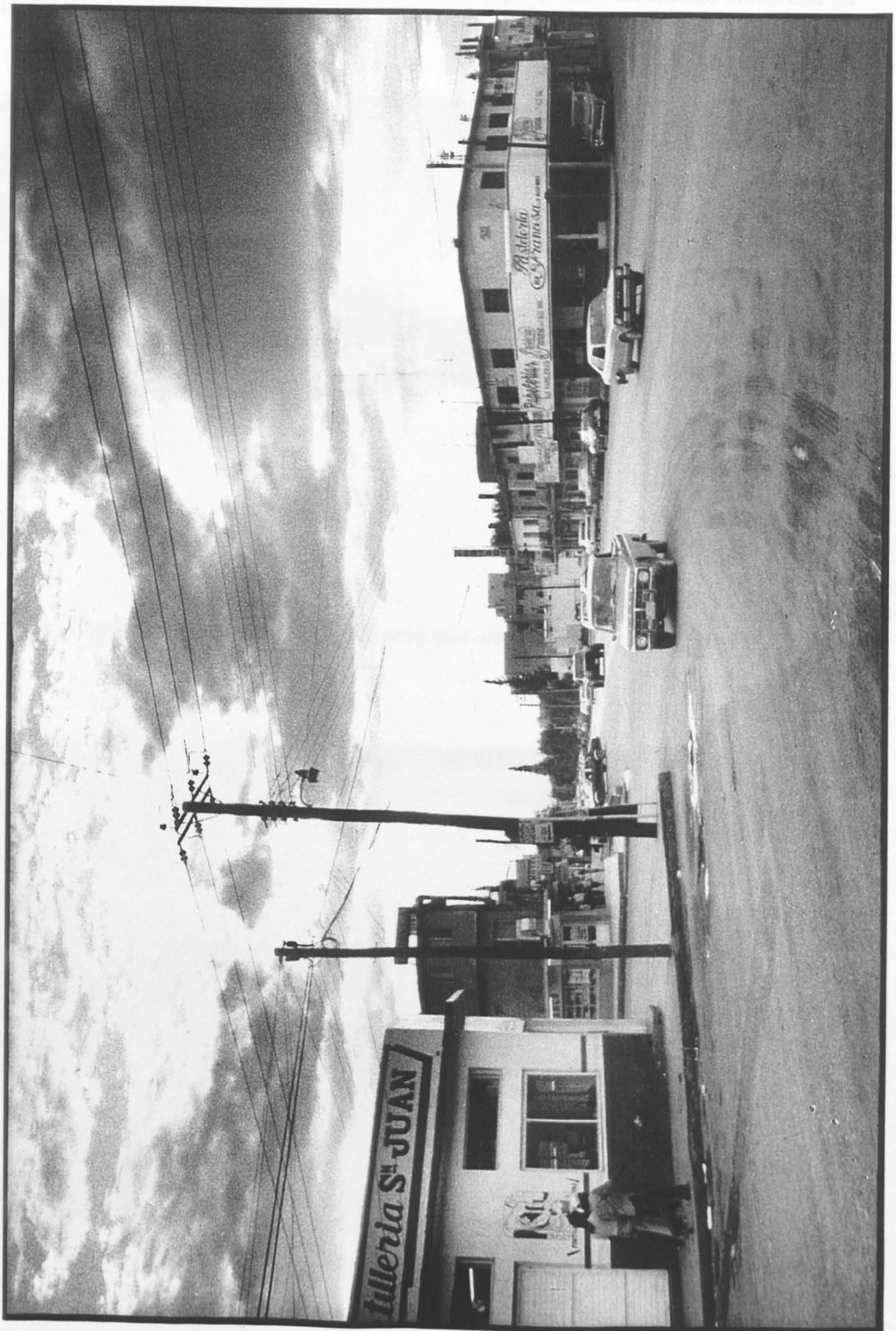
The movement of the clouds in the sky contrasts with the stasis of the roads and their silent action becomes the gauge for all motion on the street. This relationship mutates to Placeres in the way Gardea expresses the route of a man's journey in the first line of the short story 'Después de la lluvia', from the collection *Septiembre y los otros días* :

El hombre va caminando calle arriba. En dirección contraria a los nubes. (p.102)

It is the clouds that provide the directive point of focus, not buildings or a stated destination. This sensation is particularly noticeable at siesta time when the streets empty



The streets of Delicias at dusk, September 1993.





Ciudad Delicias in the 1940s. (Photographs and text from the Rotary Club's *Ciudad Delicias: xxv aniversario* )

*Aspecto de la calle 4a. Norte, donde se inicia el impulso del movimiento comercial en Delicias.*



*Antigua vista de la calle 3a. Norte, hoy la principal arteria comercial de la ciudad.*





out. However, even when vehicles pass by they cannot break into this field of force, because they cannot overcome the silence it exudes:

Hay mucho silencio, El ruido de los automóviles que pasan no logra penetrarlo. (p.105)

Gardea's description of clouds contrasts strikingly with that espoused in the 'founding of Delicias' discourse of the Rotary Clubs 25th anniversary publication. Juxtaposed with a picture of Rodin's *The Thinker*, the rhetoric animates clouds into cotton, a major cash crop product of Delicias' agroindustry. The sky:

a veces semeja estar sembrado de gigantescos capullos de algodón de impóluta blancura, nubes que se desgarran hasta lo infinito cubriendo él extenso panorama que es hoy, el sistema de riego de Delicias.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, in the novela *El agua de las esferas*, Brito Doval discusses the importance of cloudy days:

-Pero el nublado -dije- es lo importante. No la escuadra, no la empalizada. La mano del nublado acciona secretos muelles en las cosas. Estas cosas, se transforman; despliegan, como el pavo real su cola, suma de apariencias. El nublado abre las cajas de las cosas. (p.81)

While the Rotary Club used the shape and colour of clouds in the sky of Delicias as a metaphor of economic output in terms of cotton, Gardea suggests the same clouds to have metamorphic powers of transformation that do not have a designated or assigned meaning. Their shape, colour and texture lose all figurative sense, becoming a mass of intensity, performing subtle and 'secret' actions that alter perceptions of space and time. They are not put to use as 'parts' of a system of symbolic meaning as the Rotary Club attempt, but become non-metaphorical openings in the inhabitants' thresholds of perception. As Deleuze and Guattari state:



Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor. There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word. The thing and other things are no longer anything but intensities overrun by deterritorialized sound or words that are following their line of escape.<sup>36</sup>

Through readings of Placeres, cracks begin to form in the project of Delicias that run along the very lines of geometry and grids that were drawn to stamp an order of economic and social efficiency onto the town. That the geography of Delicias should allow - even encourage - the prevalence of 'natural' phenomena over the planned concrete symmetry of the streets, is a paradox that undercuts the very fabric of the project of Blake and Alvarez.<sup>37</sup>

### **Multiple Temporalities: History, Speed, Motion**

El tiempo, la burla...<sup>38</sup>

Blake was obsessed with historical time in the sense that he considered himself the founder of Delicias and felt the need to legitimize his role, through recording the dates and times of the construction of the town. His log, printed in the Rotary Club's 25th anniversary publication (p.15), maps the building of the town in temporal detail. At 10 o'clock on the 1st of April 1933 construction of the town began: on the 17th of April a breach was made that would be the first street of the town, 'Av. Agricultura': the arrival of modern 'Caterpillar' vehicles is noted to have taken place at 5 o'clock in the afternoon of the day before: on the 7th of January 1935, Blake created 'la municipalidad de Delicias con cabecera en el lugar del mismo nombre.' The birth of Delicias is locked into these founding moments, isolated in time and fixed in a linear pattern of historical



control. Against this, in Placeres there is no human will to segment and freeze time into blocks of memory. Indeed, as a man says in 'One for the Road', actions such as this are impossible as there is no 'calendar' time:

No one here records the dates...They slip away from us...Around here, the years, time, they have no handles to grab onto. (p.134.)

Blake engineered Delicias with a secularised centre, by constructing municipal buildings at its heart, in contrast to the pre-revolutionary tradition of a church in this central position<sup>39</sup>:

...frente al reloj está también el presidente municipal, la máxima autoridad civil, y sus colaboradores en la empresa común de administrar los bienes y servicios..<sup>40</sup>

They worked in conjunction with the clock-tower, to replace the Catholic organization of space and time with a modern ritual of secular efficiency. Again the rhetorical language intensifies the project:

Los actos más trascendentales de la vida del hombre de Delicias tienen siempre como fondo la majestuosa presencia del reloj: el registro de un hijo, de una propiedad; la firma de un contrato, el trámite de un juicio o la obtención de los pocos metros cuadrados de la tierra en que reposan nuestros seres amados..<sup>41</sup>

Thus, the 'presence of the clock' is not merely intended to impose linear time, as in the same instant it acts as the pivot of law and civil society. Through linguistic juxtaposition, the clock's presence is woven into moments of commercial and social celebration - the signing of a contract, the registering of a child or a property etc - until it becomes impossible to conceive of these events in any temporal arrangement but chronometric/calendar time. The one time 'majesty' of the church and its spiritual directive have been replaced with 'la majestuosa presencia del reloj', society re-mapped with a secular space-time objective.



In the autobiographical *El sol que estás mirando*, the boy David is taken by his father through the *llano* to the city for the first time in his life. At the centre he hears the ringing of bells and assumes the sound is emanating from a church, but his father corrects him:

-Lo que acabamos de oír no son campanas de iglesia -le dijo... Son las campanas de un reloj...público... (p.51/2)

Like the clock of Delicias it is situated on a high tower in the central plaza. The clock hands are weapons, 'Las manecillas parecían lanzas.' (p.52) They mark a violent institutionalisation of time that can be projected from an elevated position overlooking the city, lances that penetrate and command spatiotemporality.<sup>42</sup>

In the pseudo-capitalist invention of Delicias, the violent institution of time was a crucial action for social homogeneity. As Castoriadis states:

the explicit institution of time in capitalism is identity time or the time of marking...a measurable, homogeneous, uniform and wholly arithmetizable flux. And, as an imaginary time or a time of signification, typical capitalist time is an 'infinite' time represented as a time of indefinite progress, unlimited growth, accumulation, rationalization, time of the conquest of nature...exact knowledge, of the realization of the phantasy of omnipotence.<sup>43</sup>

In interview Gardea referred to this 'clock' time as 'el tiempo público', the sequential organizer of social life.<sup>44</sup> The official rhetoric of Delicias posits that 'La vida y la muerte se entrelazan en una ronda infinita'; an attempt to alloy the cyclical time of the seasons with a mythical perception of the endless cycle of the hands of a clock.<sup>45</sup> Through images of 'life and death', the clock becomes a privileged site for the metaphorical combination of diverse elements. The language marks an attempt to naturalise cyclical/clock time, to posit its function as an internal dynamic of human psychology, to prescribe it as the homogeneous essence and singular destiny of all temporal existence. But the force of this philosophical imposition is prone to backfire - perhaps Ing. Carlos G. Blake wound the clock of Delicias too tightly, its spring coiled under the tension of 'progressive' transformations and linguistic significations. As the 'beating heart' of the



city, with its multiple symbolic tasks it is liable to break, to slow down, or speed up under such overbearing pressure.

Such a break down occurs in Placeres, where the dusty heat prevents the mechanical functioning of watches, denying the instrumental basis of 'public time.' In the novel *Los músicos y el fuego*, Matos Bistrain attempts to gauge the time of day through his watch:

Consulta Bistrain la hora en su reloj. Luego mira a la tarde; al tiempo, según la luz, según el aire. Desconfía de la máquina. Suele atascarse con el calor que viene del clima... (p.8.)

The non-function of mechanical time forces Bistrain to estimate the hour through other means - light and air. The musicians who have also bought watches from Amezcua the watchmaker, similarly discover that their chronometers are faulty. Valdivia is blunt about this '- Los relojes no sirven...' (p.87) Amezcua, in contrast exists in the 'clockwork' time of his watches and their construction. Locked away in his *taller*, 'Tanili Amezcua apenas conocía la muerte del sol.' (p.89) Isolated from Bistrain's space-time existence in light and air, he becomes the only character in Gardea's work to be immune from the temporal power of the sun. Amezcua is perhaps a failing agent of modernity - while he sells time to the musicians, he is unable to impress 'modern' time and capitalism's use of it to organise labour, because his watches fail to operate.

I asked Gardea if in *Los músicos y el fuego* there was 'una critica del tiempo cronometrico', to which he replied 'Posiblemente, sí.' He went on to suggest that time is heterogeneous and exists in multiple forms, giving examples such as 'el tiempo psicológico' and 'el tiempo del lector' that undermine 'public time':

De alguna manera en cuanto te vuelves lector le das en la madre al tiempo público. Porque tu tiempo de lectura es otro.<sup>46</sup>



The perception of multiple times runs through Placeres and speed and spatial movement are crucial to their co-existence. In the first chapter of *El diablo en el ojo*, Gardea describes a man putting a key into a lock. The action of this event unfolds extremely slowly, over some ten pages. If measured in chronometric time the event would take seconds to fulfil, but it becomes stretched out over a much longer period as Gardea relates the man's sensory, emotive and perceptive relationship with the key:

En mi mano derecha, al contacto de los dedos, el metal de la llave se había entibiado. Por el calor ganado a costa de mi cuerpo y del va y viene de mi pulso, la llave estaba cambiando. (p.6)

The events can no longer be measured by 'public time', as other non-sequential speeds and spatiotemporal forces are at work. As they intensify, the 'reader' is engulfed by the energy of the human body, its movements and speeds generating spatial forms and arrangements.

The rhythm of the slow transformation of the key and its subtle interaction with the man's body is suddenly broken by the sound of a motorbike approaching at speed:

...entonces, el ruido del motor...retumbo de un trueno inagotable. Se le respiraba como el aire. La llave se había calentado de nuevo al contacto con el cuerpo de su guía. (p.11)

The noise of the motorbike's engine as it accelerates and the sight of a growing cloud of dust caused by its rapid motion, contrasts with the slow movement of heat in the key, producing conflicting speed dimensions, the text operating in several temporalities at once. These temporalities are histories - mechanical technology and its new speed parameters combine with another pace of life, the pulse of the human body. Each transform and complicate the other and the text becomes a shifting historical site.

In *Los músicos y el fuego*, Casio paces the streets of Placeres. To an onlooker, his exaggerated movements give his motion the appearance of a dream-like flight:



Las piernas de Casio devoraban la tierra del sueño, pero su cuerpo, apenas se movía. El hombre lo miraba como si nada; como si Casio no estuviera desbaratándose las alas contra un aire de plomo. (p.50)

The contrast of stasis and movement suggests the multiple times of Casio's actions. At the same time, spatial perceptions become energized and non-geometric, an experience that challenges and literally shakes apart any attempt at the segmentation of time:

El volar de Casio un sueño; no acababa el andarín de esfumarse. Daba zancadas en un tremedal de siglos. (p.50)

The trembling site produces shifting and hypnotic realities in which space and time are inseparable. Rather than being formed by a three dimensional space and a one dimensional time, the town exists in a much wider space-time dimension. As Doreen Massey puts it, instead of counterposing a 'linear process' (historical time) to a 'flat surface (which...reduces space from three to two dimensions), it is necessary to insist on the irrefutable four dimensionality (indeed n-dimensionality) of things.'<sup>47</sup> In the short story 'Trinitario' from the collection *Septiembre y los otros días*, after a long drive across the *llano*, the passengers of the car have no sense of linear 'progression' - spatial or temporal - the landscape forcing them into conflicting perceptions of their movement:

El tiempo que duró la carrera los hombres tuvieron el sentimiento de no haberse movido para nada y de haber sólo empañado el monótono paisaje con una espesa nube de polvo. (p.49)

### 'El silencio en los llanos de Placeres...'<sup>48</sup>

Commenting on *Los músicos y el fuego*, Gardea relates time to the sonic world of Placeres, particularly through silence. Of the musicians, he states:



...estos personajes tienen muy poco en cuenta del tiempo del reloj...y sobre todo pienso que lo tienen muy poco en cuenta porque viven muy pegados al silencio.

He continues:

yo pienso que el silencio desfonda al tiempo público...lo desfonda y el tiempo entonces se convierte en otra cosa...El silencio sería enemigo del tiempo público. Y el lector funcionaría al mismo tiempo de acuerdo con ese tiempo, de acuerdo con los personajes de las novelas y cuentos.<sup>49</sup>

If, as Hoyle suggests, space is not a passive void that is filled by physical objects, but the 'product of energy',<sup>50</sup> then the sound of energy, as much as the sight of it, effects perceptions of space. Public time becomes disrupted because the energized field of sound in which the travelling musicians exist is not striated by the chimes of a clock, or the patterns of commercial activity that operate around chronographic instruments. Time is converted by the 'silence' of their lives, not because of an absence or lack of sound, but through the amplification of sonic rhythms usually inaudible in a commercial polis: the monotonous singing of the *chicharas* in the surrounding *llano*, which stops and starts suddenly and without warning; the sound of the wind as it disturbs the mezquites and of dust particles shifting and settling on bodies, buildings and machines. Silence is an active force, turning and moving in clusters of energy, marking and redefining spatial forms:

En la recargada sombra, por encima de las cabezas, de los alientos, planeaba un silencio hostil; giraba haciendo círculos.<sup>51</sup>

As a writer of silences, in his own words Gardea becomes an 'enemy' of public time.

The silence is intensified by the solitude that pervades Gardea's texts. In 1940, despite the construction of Delicias, population density in the region was around 2.3 people per km<sup>2</sup>. By 1980, the figure had risen to only 6.54 people per km<sup>2</sup>, for while the city grew,



surrounding rural areas witnessed depopulation as people migrated to urban conurbations throughout Mexico.<sup>52</sup> This is reflected in Placeres, where it is rare for more than one or two of the inhabitants to be on the streets at any one time. Rather than fulfilling the Rotary Club's image of a bustling and busy agroindustrial town, the streets of Placeres are deserted, echoing the quiet solitude of the unnamed *pueblos* dotted across the *llano*. Rather than a centre of socio-economic activity, the town seems to float in a continual *siesta* state.

With the inactivity of the streets in the noonday heat, the acoustic planes of Placeres are engulfed by the 'silence' of the *llano* - 'el silencio, un desierto sin orillas.'<sup>53</sup> As it penetrates, the intensity of this invisible and 'formless' action shifts the perceptions of the town from the visual/optic scene to an acoustic realm. This enables subtle sounds to transform the spatial dimensions of the town, the edges and borders of which can no longer define its geographic structure, becoming 'sin orillas'. (p.31)

The penetration is that of the 'smooth', 'nomadic' space of the *llano*, where as Deleuze and Guattari state:

there is no line separating earth and sky; there is no intermediate distance, no perspective or contour; visibility is limited; and yet there is an extraordinarily fine topology that relies not on points or objects but...on sets of relations (winds, undulations of snow or sand, the song of the sand or the creaking of ice, the tactile qualities of both). It is a tactile space, or rather 'haptic', a sonorous much more than a visual space.<sup>54</sup>

In Gardea's words, 'La tierra no conocía montes allí, nada que atajara las soledades, los vientos, los silencios.'<sup>55</sup> This shift away from the visual/ocular, amplifies the plain's sonority and its tactile/haptic dimensions. In 'Todos los años de nieve', on a snowy winter's night, Corbala wheels a dying old man across the *llano* to visit his first love:

Corbala levantó la vista. De un golpe dejó de sentir frío, como si ya se hubiera muerto: el cielo, todo el horizonte, delante de él, estaba blanco, como lleno de luz. Y entonces sí, empezó a oír el rumor, el choque de unas ramas con otras, el aullido de las espinas lejanas. (p.26)



While the 'smooth space' confuses Corbala, its effect is still more devastating in its continual penetration of the striated zone of Placeres, disturbing the inhabitants' mental and sensory faculties: 'La calle silenciosa acabó de abrumar a Borja.'<sup>56</sup>

### Conclusion

The 'founders' of Delicias claimed that 'Todo en materia urbanística obedece a un plan preconcebido'.<sup>57</sup> This maxim denies the possibility of spatial transformations beyond the planner's will, grid-locking human bodies and perceptions into pre-destined arrangements controlled by geographic and symbolic formations. Against it, Jesús Gardea's *archi-textures* open up multiple routes of escape, 'lines of flight' along which the inhabitant can move:

En Placeres el sol inventaba la altura del mundo. Las cosas de Placeres tenían sus dobles, torres cristalinas navegando en el aire. Entraban hasta el cielo. Y había andamios, y escaleras de caracol. Esto quiso ver mi ojo.<sup>58</sup>



## Notes

1. Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, p.2.
2. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, p.149.
3. Population figure from *Estudio socioeconómico y demográfico del subsistema de ciudades: Chihuahua, Cuahémoc, Delicias, Parral*, México D.F.: Consejo Nacional de Población, 1988.
4. William Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, p.12.
5. Enríquez clearly blamed Villa for destroying Chihuahua's agricultural output, naming his revolutionaries 'las hordas de Villa' led by 'los ataques del Centauro.' (Club Rotario, *Ciudad Delicias: XXV Aniversario*, p.12.)
6. See Luis Aboites, '¿De dónde llegaron los que llegaron a Delicias, Chihuahua?', *Revista Cultura Norte*, año 6, no. 21.
7. Club Rotario, *Delicias: 50 Años*, p.242. The Rotary Club in Delicias has held in its membership the most influential and wealthy business men of the area. By 1983 many of them were the sons of the economic pioneers of the town, and the Club's publications give vital insights into the continuity of ideals of 'progress' that have been espoused from the founding of the city to the present day.
8. Club Rotario, *Ciudad Delicias: XXV Aniversario*, p.3.
9. Club Rotario, *Ciudad Delicias: XXV Aniversario*, p.15.
10. See Luis Aboites Aguilar, *Lairrigación revolucionaria*.
11. Virilio, quoted by Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.386.
12. Victor Orozco, *Chihuahua: Sociedad, Economía, Política y Cultura*, p.103.
13. Marta Turok et. al., *Diagnóstico sociocultural del estado de Chihuahua*, p.73.
14. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.385.
15. Club Rotario, *Ciudad Delicias: XXV Aniversario*, p.3.
16. Club Rotario, *Delicias: 50 Años*, p.242.
17. Club Rotario, *Delicias: 50 Años*, p.242.
18. Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, p.16.
19. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p.132.
20. Samuel Edgerton writing on Panofsky, quoted by L. Goldstein in *The Social and Cultural Roots of Linear Perspective*, p.14.
21. Virilio, quoted by Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.536.
22. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p.165.
23. Lefebvre, p.152.
24. Club Rotario, *Delicias: 50 Años*, p.256.
25. Lefebvre, p.23.
26. Doreen Massey, *Politics and Space/Time*, p.70.
27. See Massey.
28. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p.14.
29. Gardea, *La canción de las mulas muertas*, p.99.
30. Lefebvre, p.145.
31. Lefebvre, p.79.
32. Lefebvre, p.13.
33. Lefebvre, p.77.
34. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.43.
35. Club Rotario, *Ciudad Delicias: XXV Aniversario*, p.3.
36. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, p.22.
37. While Delicias has developed at a startling rate to become a city of some 100,000 people, with a booming agroindustry and thriving industrial plants, the heart of the town and much of the surrounding area has backfired on the planners aims. In the town centre,



the geography and cultural landscape has changed little in the past forty years. The models of cars and pick-ups, the facias of shops and cafes, even the number of people on the streets may have altered, but there remains a spatial dynamic on the streets of Delicias that Gardea transferred to Placeres in his stories and novels. The urban terrain acts as a spatial memory, landscapes becoming historical maps, the town carrying its past in its spatial structures.

38. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.103.
39. The municipal buildings include that of S.A.R.H., J.M.A.S., la Asociación Civil de Usuarios, la Presidencia Municipal and las Oficinas de Recaudación de Rentas.
40. Club Rotario, *Delicias, 50 años*, p.256.
41. Club Rotario, *Delicias: 50 Años*, p.256.
42. In the short story, 'Nadie muera la vispera', Gardea describes a clock as 'un animal de veneno', with a 'timbre endemoniado' (p.93).
43. Castoriadis, p.207.
44. Interview between Hinchliffe and Gardea, September 1993.
45. Club Rotario, p.256.
46. Interview between Hinchliffe and Gardea.
47. Massey, p.80.
48. Gardea, *Los músicos y el fuego*, p. 65.
49. Interview between Hinchliffe and Gardea.
50. Lefebvre, p.13.
51. Gardea, *El agua de las esferas*, p.39.
52. Population density figures from *Estudio socioeconómico y demográfico del subsistema de ciudades: Chihuahua, Cuahémoc, Delicias, Parral*.
53. Gardea, *Los músicos y el fuego*, p.17.
54. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.382.
55. Gardea, 'Trinitario', p.48.
56. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.31.
57. Club Rotario, *Delicias, 50 años*, p.242.
58. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.65.



## THREE

### Language as Death Sentence

The poet is put to death because he wants to turn rhythm into a dominant element; because he wants to make language perceive what it doesn't want to say, provide it with its matter independently of the sign, and free it from denotation.

Julia Kristeva<sup>1</sup>

As Volosinov states, the main tradition of linguistic science, from its ancestry in philology to twentieth century linguistics, has been one of 'passive understanding'.<sup>2</sup> While early philology confined itself to the study of languages no longer spoken, 'dead' languages - thus isolating language from both orality and social forces - modern linguists of the Saussurean school have reduced the discussion of 'living' languages to questions of structure, with similar consequences. In *The Object of Study*, Saussure states:

The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language to it.<sup>3</sup>

This maxim forces all utterances to be systematically placed inside an a priorital theoretical structure, independent from socio-historical forces. 'Living' languages are pacified and killed off in the process; they are emptied of all relationships of power and desire. Noam Chomsky achieves this separation of language and culture through his reductive adherence to 'rules of grammar' as his 'primary concern'. He states:



A language L is understood to be a set...of finite strings of symbols drawn from a finite 'alphabet.' A grammar of L is a system of rules that specifies the set of sentences of L and assigns to each sentence a structural description.<sup>4</sup>

Language is limited to the logic of what Chomsky perceives to be its inherent rules - the 'finite' limits of its symbolic structure - without any attempt to relate it to socio-cultural phenomena.

Saussure splits language into three segments: *langue* (the underlying system on the basis of which speakers are able to understand and produce speech) *parole* (individual speech acts) and *langage* (the universal human phenomenon of language). Of these, *langue* forms the core of structural linguistics of the Saussurean school. It represents language as a system in which all forms of speech can be analysed and 'understood', through constants of grammar and syntax and through meanings designated by semiotic systems (through the linguistic sign's dyadic relationship of signifier and signified). Structure is paramount in the analysis, as Saussure asserts, 'language...is both a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give linguistic structure pride of place among the facts of language, we introduce a natural order into an aggregate which lends itself to no other classification.'<sup>5</sup> In this way, Saussure attempts to *naturalize* the existence of a context-free and universal structure in language, and to *standardize* its ability to generate meaning, through grammatical and syntactical rules - 'a faculty endowed by nature'.

The impact of Saussure's linguistic theory set out in *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) has been far reaching in the study of language, influencing among others: the *functionalist linguistics* of the Prague School, the *glossematics* of the Copenhagen School developed in the 1930s, the theories of *systemic* and *functional* grammar initiated by Michael Halliday in the London School in the 1960s, the theories of *universal* and *generative grammar* of Noam Chomsky and much post-war literary and social criticism, notably the work of Roman Jakobson. While structuralism has been attacked in recent years, Saussure's teaching remains a powerful force, particularly in the



rise of semiotics. Few academics in the western world have been able to resist the seduction of Saussure's reductive signifier-signified relationship and the 'chains of meaning' it claims to illuminate.<sup>6</sup>

In Mexico, the intellectual hegemony established in the capital city by 'boom' writers such as Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz - that continues to exist to this day - was founded on Saussurean theories fashionable in the 1960s. In an essay on Paz's *Claude Lévi-Strauss o el nuevo festín de Esopo* (1967), William Rowe asserts that Paz homologises Saussurean linguistics with Lévi-Strauss's structural approach to myths.<sup>7</sup> Rowe suggests that Paz ignores the specifics of Lévi-Strauss's ethnographical materials and generalises the anthropologist's theories to conclude that myths, like language, have an autonomous and universal structure. In other words, they exist independently from socio-economic and cultural processes, offering in Paz's words, 'una esfera en la que el espíritu opera con mayor libertad ya que no se enfrenta ni a los procesos económicos ni a las realidades sexuales sino a sí mismo.' (p.77) When taken together, the universal structures of myth and language become a model for the foundation of meaning, what Paz calls 'la universalidad de la razón', or 'el espíritu humano'. He states:

La estructura no es histórica; es natural y en ella reside la verdadera naturaleza humana...<sup>8</sup>

From this position, as Rowe concludes, Paz uses myth and language as an interpretive frame that can be applied regardless of historical and cultural contexts.

In *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*, Carlos Fuentes adopts Saussure's theory of the universality of the structures of language, to flatten out all cultural and geographical differences in world literature.<sup>9</sup> Fuentes suggests that a new *universal* centre - as opposed to the traditional cultural relativism that posits Europe as the centre and Latin America as marginal - is generated by this theory. The main problem with this is that the homogeneous and global *universal* is elevated at the expense of local history and culture.



For example, Fuentes analyses Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* as a reworking of Greek myths, ignoring the native American myths that are more likely to be its material.

In contrast to Fuentes and Paz, and in the tradition of Juan Rulfo, the work of Jesús Gardea resists the 'passive understanding' of structural linguistics. Gardea's textual language is neither part of some universal of world literature, nor an autonomous structure exempt from historical forces. Rather, it generates the unique space of Placeres, which exists at the intersection of Gardea's poetics and the cultural specifics of life in a *pueblo* of central Chihuahua in the mid twentieth century. In this space, language cannot be confined to the control structures of traditional semiotic analysis. Firstly, words are not just signifiers that produce signifieds, but more like what speech-act theorists call 'performative utterances' - actions with physical and violent consequences. Secondly, the linguistic communication of signs is complicated by relationships of power, the conflicting social positions of the speakers and interlocutors that inhabit Gardea's world. What Bourdieu calls the social position of the speaker - the power delegated to them by social institutions - becomes inseparable from all utterance.<sup>10</sup>

### **'El mueble': Against Language as 'Information'**

An enduring current of post-Saussurean linguistic thought posits that the 'fundamental function' of language is that of communication and the exchange of information. From a Mexican perspective, Octavio Paz suggests that this occurs because words have *universal* meanings:

el poeta no tiene más remedio que servirse de las palabras -  
cada una con un significado semejante para todos...<sup>11</sup>

In Gardea's short story 'El mueble', from the collection *Los viernes de Lautaro*, this 'function' of language breaks down - textual dialogues are uttered in the absence of



communicative structures and informational reference. The tale concerns a boatman and his workers who have been assigned the job of moving a large piece of furniture across a lake. Initially, the task seems difficult owing to the size and weight of the wardrobe, yet it becomes ultimately impossible for other reasons - the workers cannot find out who actually owns the wardrobe and who is going to pay them, language as a mode of communication failing them. Don Arnulfo the boat owner, and his assistant, Cristóbal try several times to locate the woman Martina Carrasco who they assume owns the wardrobe, going on the orders of the woman's husband, who initially hired their services in the morning, but who cannot be found in the village in the afternoon.<sup>12</sup> Because Martina is absent, all the boatmen have to go on is the 'information' they manage to extract from an old man in conversation:

- Buscamos a Martina Carrasco -dijo el lanchero.
- Martina Carrasco no está -dijo el viejo.
- ¿Dónde está?
- No sé.
- ¿A qué hora veulve?
- Tampoco lo sé.
- Nos debe dinero.
- Al mundo entero se lo debe.
- Nosotros tenemos trepado ya su mueble en la lancha.
- Es lo mismo. (p.66/67)

Why is the dialogue so forced and why is the old man so evasive and 'uncommunicative'? Firstly, it is crucial to situate the conversation as utterances assembled from the contrasting socio-economic positions/territories of the speakers and interlocutors. As Volosinov states, 'A word is a territory shared by both addressor and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor.'<sup>13</sup> Conversation depends upon the agents involved - who is speaking and on what authority, what are the relations of power and the social positions of the speakers, are there any hidden agendas, and why is speech contact necessary? We are told little of the old man's position vis-á-vis the village's social/power structure, leaving his motives unclear. Perhaps, he resents strangers or outsiders, such as the boatmen, working in his village. When the competitive economic



environment of the tale is taken into account - in which rival boatmen from different areas attempt to kill each other for business supremacy - this could well be a factor. Perhaps, it is the Carrascos he dislikes, maybe for their wealth, or due to a family feud, or for any number of unknown reasons. Because we are not given an intricate psychological or social profile of the characters, Gardea destabilises traditional narrative perspectives, leaving readers to use what little they are given to make confused linkages and multiple narratives within the narrative.

In the last conversation of 'El mueble', the narrative shifts again. Cristóbal confronts the old man for the last time, contending that Martina's husband Gertrudis had hired them that morning to move the wardrobe and that Martina would pay them. The old man replies:

-No le hubieran hecho caso a Gertrudis. El ropero no es de Martina.

-¿Y de quién es, entonces?

-Sabrá Dios. Hoy amaneció en la playa, mirando con su luna las aguas del lago. (p.70)

With the wardrobe's sudden lack of an assigned owner, the already unstable referential structure of the tale simultaneously collapses and becomes relocated. The boatmen's assumptions of their fixed relationship as providers of labour, with Gertrudis the owner of capital, are capsized by the discovery that the Carrascos do not in fact own the wardrobe, and that it mysteriously arrived from an unknown place. Suddenly, the job is annulled, no longer by the geographical absence of the owners, but by a lack of any fixed identity of ownership, the lack of a traceable map of origin. Without this identity, the accepted pattern of commercial exchange is negated. It is unclear whether the old man deliberately deceived the boatmen, or simply felt the information was not important. What Gardea achieves is a demonstration of the danger of assuming that the function of language is communication for mutual benefit.

An example of this assumption in modern linguistic theory can be found in H.P. Grice's theory of conversation that relies upon a 'cooperative principle' in language:



We cooperate in order to communicate; communication is the exchange of informative messages.<sup>14</sup>

To comply with this principle, speakers have to follow a variety of subprinciples or maxims. These include maxims of *quantity* - 'Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange', - *quality* - 'Do not say what you believe to be false', - *relation* - 'be relevant' - and *manner* - 'Avoid obscurity and ambiguity.'<sup>15</sup> Thus, Grice structures his linguistic interpretations on an ideal system of 'fair-play' in the exchange of words, in which language exchange is devoid of threat and deception. In doing so, he denies the use of speech for purposes of domination, ridding language of its intimacy with social, political and economic institutions and their agents. This marks an attempt to purify language by emptying it of power and desire.

At the same time, Grice's rules of linguistic exchange mirror the commercial exchange mechanisms of *laissez-faire* economics - theories of free market and free enterprise economics vigorously promoted since the publication of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* in the 18th century. Grice transmutes industrial capitalism's mythology of the free market as a mutually beneficial system, to his own mythical concept of language - the 'cooperative principle'. In 'El mueble' however, the conditions of the 'cooperative principle' do not exist, in either economic or linguistic terms. Economically, 'El mueble' is beneficial to neither those supplying a commercial service (the boatmen) nor to those demanding it (the Carrasco family). Indeed, Adam Smith's notion of economics being led by an 'invisible hand' - a magical notion of free market trading bringing advantages to society as a whole - cannot function within the socio-economic dynamics of Chihuahuan lakeside life.

In linguistic terms, Grice's 'maxims' are consistently destroyed across Gardea's texts: dialogues develop into assemblages of lies and deceit ('Trinitario', *El diablo en el ojo*): narrative progression is dislocated by deceptions and concealments (*El agua de las esferas*): questions are commands let loose in the context of their concurrent power



structures (*La canción de las mulas muertas*): the emission of words has greater power when those that utter them are physically absent ('El mueble').<sup>16</sup>

The exchange of language in these texts challenges and denies the fundamental tenet of Saussurean linguistics, that language is a structure that 'exists only in virtue of a kind of contract agreed between the members of a community.'<sup>17</sup> This 'contract' is implicated through the concept of language as a system of signs whose semiotic meaning is universal to those who use it. As Saussure states:

All the individuals linguistically linked...will establish among themselves a kind of mean; all of them will reproduce...the same signs linked to the same concepts.<sup>18</sup>

If this theory is put to the test in 'El mueble', through a Saussurean semiological analysis, its shortcomings are immediately apparent. If the word *mueble* is taken as the linguistic sign (the signifier) of the wardrobe as a concept or image (the signified), the 'contract' or 'cooperative principle' fails, as the wardrobe means different things to different people. To the boatmen it signifies not merely a piece of furniture, but an item to be transported for monetary gain; they are desperate to find the owner to complete the transaction. For the old man, on the other hand, it appeared from nowhere as an abstract, almost magical object with no apparent value, hence the communicative block.

If the triadic approach of the American linguist Charles Sanders Peirce - the 'Godfather' of semiotics - is taken into account, the boatmen and the old man are conceived of as *interpretants* of the semiotic relationship of signifier and signified. Their responses and thoughts become signs in themselves, allowing interpretation *ad infinitum* and an escape from the dogma of the 'cooperative principle.' The limitations of Peirce's triadic semiotic approach - which has been popular with poststructuralist and deconstructivist thinkers due to its apparent prevention of interpretive closure - are explored later in this chapter. Suffice to say that it remains an overbearing systemic approach, a triangular constraint based on signifier-signified-interpretant relations. Where is the 'underlying signifier' in



'El mueble'? There are not even the conditions for its existence. The combination of the shifting and absent voices of the text and the lack of 'information' available to the reader, suggests that language becomes too heterogeneous to support stable chains of signs. It no longer possesses the homogeneous qualities necessary for semiotic analysis and is unable to provide a secure interpretative frame to generate meaning in this way.

If the old man is telling the truth about the wardrobe, then 'El mueble' is a text of multiple deception. While Gardea sets up the boatmen to believe Gertrudis and to be conned into transporting the wardrobe, he is simultaneously misleading the reader. What was initially perceived as lack of information that drove the text along - where are the Carrascos? - metamorphosizes into Gardea's exploration of the way information works in language and how it can be manipulated to serve power. What is important is not the 'lack' or absence of information, so much as a destabilization of the way in which it is conveyed, not only between the characters, but also in the 'dialogic relationship' between author and reader.<sup>19</sup> Gardea uses the insecurity of language - the lies, deceit and omissions of the characters - not simply as a representation of a society in which 'truth' does not function, but to force the reader to question the authoritative voice of the author, to suggest that the text is unreliable, that written and spoken utterances are not easily deciphered systemic codes, debasing the authorial voice and its traditional authority in language.

### **The Order Word and the Command**

The confusion in 'El mueble' around the ownership of the wardrobe, shifts the emphasis of power from the need to possess physical capital to the ability to control people through language. The deception of the boatmen by Gertrudis occurs because language operates not as Grice believes as mutually beneficial communication, but as a series of commands fired from a position of power upon the boatmen, to get them to transport the wardrobe. In this, Gardea exposes what Deleuze and Guattari call the



'order-word' in language - 'Language is made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience.'<sup>20</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari use the example of teachers' questions to their pupils, to illustrate that rather than a cooperative process, questions are statements that force answers. In this sense, there are only answers, and never questions.<sup>21</sup> This is '...language (as) the transmission of the word as order-word, not the communication of sign as information.'<sup>22</sup> They are order-words because they are commands uttered from positions of power, speech being located inside social and cultural struggle. Deleuze and Guattari's theory is heavily influenced by the work of Elias Canetti. In *Crowds and Power* the latter writes:

All questioning is a forcible intrusion. When used as an instrument of power it is like a knife cutting into the flesh of the victim. The questioner knows what there is to find, but he wants actually to touch it and bring it to light.<sup>23</sup>

The question, as Canetti contends, is tied to the command. 'The oldest command - and it is far older than man - is a death sentence, and it compels the victim to flee.'<sup>24</sup> It is a command to flee generated in the threat of death imposed by the disparity of strength between animals (power relationships between humans), a sentence of death that erupts for example in the roar of a lion. Commands do not have to be emitted in linguistic form, they 'are older than speech. If this were not so, dogs could not understand them.'<sup>25</sup> They do not even need to be heard, the flight-command being emitted by the eyes, shape or smell of a creature. In *El agua de las esferas*, Brito Doval is terrified by the shadows of his enemies as they attempt to pick the lock of his door with skeleton keys:

Las sombras daban la prueba, erizadas tanto alrededor de sus claves, de que era hondo el asunto que entre manos, entre bocas, traían. (p.45)

For Canetti, this non-linguistic command to flee - like the predator's call or presence - is transferred to words in modes of speech and writing and its force continues to flow.



However, the social process of language 'domesticates' and conceals the sentence of death, so that physical injury and killing is usually avoided. What makes the sentence of death still relevant is because as Canetti says, 'the threat and fear of it is always contained within (language); and the continued pronouncement and execution of real death sentences keeps alive the fear of every individual command...'26 This continuity of threat, emerges in 'El mueble' through the sense of language as poison, a concealed sentence of death.

As the boatmen work under the relentless heat of the sun, a woman approaches and gives Cristobál a bottle of water for refreshment. Instead of thanking her, he responds with distrust:

El hombre la puso contra la luz del sol, empuñándola por el cuello, agitándola apenas. '¿Por qué lo hace?, le preguntó la mujer...'Para cerciorarme de que el agua no trae nada', le respondió... (p.64)

It is not until the final interchange of the text that Gardea gives fuller access to the nature of these suspicions. The old man tells Cristóbal that he shouldn't have listened to Gertrudis, to which he replies:

-Cómo no, si andamos escasos de trabajo y la competencia no perdona. Puro bote de motor. Además de que ya han querido eliminar al patrón Arnulfo con veneno. (p.70)

The fear of poisoning, and its loaded reference to the competitive commercial market of lake transportation - and the threat of modern technology within the competition - is situated at the end of the text directly before the old man's revelation that the wardrobe has no owner. It is positioned in this way because the two are inextricably linked, both extolling Gardea's suspicion of language and the feelings of lies and mistrust that dominate the story's 'community'. Yet, poison is not simply a metaphor, because as a metaphor of language it is unworkable. As a metaphor, it would imply that language has a pure source of origin like a spring, that could then be contaminated. Rather, the poison



that may reside in the bottle of water undergoes a *metamorphosis* into language and vice-versa throughout the text. In contrast to the purity of a spring, language flows as a liquid of social sediments, the poison being one of many currents in its 'social stream'.<sup>27</sup> It is a metamorphosis because the poison is actually present in the utterances of the text, in its manipulations of meaning and intent - it is physically, psychologically, socially and economically dangerous. In this sense, language as command is a form of poison; a 'concealed threat of the sentence of death', as Canetti would put it.

### Language and Violence

The relationship between language and violence in Gardea's work can be given a wider cultural context through a brief analysis of Chihuahuan history, from the Conquest to the late 20th century. When Cabeza de Vaca invaded the region in 1530 he was confronted by an indigenous population comprised of nomadic, warring tribes who defended ancient territorial boundaries at all cost. The collision of cultures was exceptionally violent and lasted until the late 19th century. While the tribes plundered, raided and killed the advancing *colonos*, the Spaniards and *mestizos* embarked upon a genocidal mission to rid Chihuahua of its native peoples and replace it with alien forms of social organization, belief structures, customs and cultural traditions.

The violence was also exceptional due to the nomadic and semi-nomadic nature of the population that impeded the kind of mestizaje process that had occurred in southern and central Mexico. The indigenous groups either fled from the areas of Spanish settlement to avoid subjugation into virtual slavery in the mines, or were openly hostile. This prevented the mixture of Spanish and indigenous blood, denying the colonisers access to a more peaceful and integrated appropriation of territory through newly formed blood ties.



*Las guerras de los indios* subsided briefly in the territorial war between Mexico and the USA in the 1840s. But the violence continued as US troops invaded Chihuahua, killing and looting to the south. With the US victory, the war with the Apache reached its zenith. Apache raiders penetrated deeper into Chihuahua armed with modern firearms supplied by US gun dealers that gave them a distinct technological advantage over the poorly equipped Mexican army. In desperation, the state governor instigated *Las contratas de sangre*, which offered upwards of one hundred dollars on receipt of an Apache scalp.<sup>28</sup> But the scalpers found easier prey in sedentary and mestizo populations, turning the guns paid for by the government upon the people they were supposed to protect. The Apache and Comanche retaliated in kind, putting their own bounties on the heads of *gringos* and *mestizos* and Chihuahua entered a period of scalping frenzy.<sup>29</sup> As a consequence, the desired colonization and economic development of the region through mining and ranching on the plains, and agriculture in the central valleys was severely hampered. It was not until the 1890s that the nomads were finally defeated, Chihuahuan culture built upon three centuries of total violence. As Orozco puts it, 'Esta 'guerra larga' de Chihuahua marcará con su impronta el alma de sus habitantes rurales.'<sup>30</sup>

Chihuahua's legacy of violence continued through the revolutionary years, when it experienced 'una sangría humana y una destrucción material que pocas regiones del país soportaron tan drásticamente.'<sup>31</sup> The battles of the central corridor to gain control of the geopolitical line between Juárez and Zacatecas brought wave after wave of fighting forces through the region.

If as Orozco states, the wars of Chihuahua had a marked effect upon the 'soul' of the state's inhabitants, it follows that the language of Gardea's characters is an expression of this history of violence. Indeed, oral communication between the inhabitants of Placeres is frequently loaded with violent intent. Not only does their speech violate the possibilities of language serving an informative function, it is also injected with the desire to injure, to displace and deceive the interlocutor's psyche and body. Words are not merely *descriptions* - linguistic signs that refer to other signs in an infinite chain - but



*actions* with consequences as lethal as any physical assault. In the novel *El agua de las esferas*, words move in clusters of force, in penetrative flights, rapid and aggressive:

Llama a Moy. El llamado vuela por la fila, de boca en boca, hasta llegar, caldeado y penetrado de alientos, a oídos de Moy. (p.82)

The words become physical entities<sup>32</sup>; in *El agua de las esferas* they can be seen moving in space - 'Después de habladas, las palabras del mesero, seguían vibrando en la luz.' (p.30) From vibrating energy, they mutate into weapons of war. In *El diablo en el ojo*, Orive's speech moves like 'la navaja en el aire' (p.35), stabbing and cutting at those within earshot. As they become knives, the words project Orive's power, marking its territorial boundaries and penetrating the bodies and psyches of his enemies. Arana is not capable of a linguistic response, he has no form of counter-attack or shield and suffers under the attack:

Arana no supo defenderse de Orive; no tuvo palabras; manoteó el aire. (p.29)

The linguistic assault continues in *El agua de las esferas*. Valencia's words have the impact of a lethal poison projected at the body of Moy - 'Como si le hubieran escupido veneno a la cara, el apartarse de Moy.' (p.50) Language here is not a signified representation of events, but their very action. Words, as the speech-act theorists (Austin and Searle) put it, are *performative utterances*.<sup>33</sup> They gain physical edges and momentum as knives, poison and projectiles of force issued in relationships of power. A sonic terrain forms out of these textures and actions of speech, becoming visible and 'concrete'. As the words perform, a territorial chasm of power develops between speaker and interlocutor, a linguistic battle line:

Me provocaban un vacío las palabras del mesero. Un silencio de abismos. Ante la boca de aquel infierno helado, me defendía. (p.30)



**'En la caliente boca de la noche': Technology and the 'Sting'**

The performativity and violence of language is crucial to the short story 'En la caliente boca de la noche', from the collection *Los viernes de Lautaro*. A man drives at night into the *llano* from his city home, at the behest of a 'friend' to attend a fiesta at an oasis *pueblo*. The road is dusty and he sweats profusely in the intolerable heat. He comments, 'Me parece demasiado caliente para ser tan noche' (p.97.), and immediately the story gains a sense of unease; the *llano* is oppressively close and asphyxiating in spite of the open spaces - a claustrophobic panorama. This environment is inseparable from the language of the text, which combines tight and stunted sentence structure with poetic shifts and movements:

El auto huele a polvo recalentado por el sol. Voy corriendo rumbo a la casa de un amigo que vive fuera de la ciudad. El aire del verano entra a raudales por las ventanillas. Huele a hierbas, y cuando choca en mi cara, lo oigo gemir. (p.97)

But language and the *llano* interpenetrate further - the driver has been lured into this uneasy space through the voice as order-word. As in 'El mueble', the voice of command and directive overtone - in this case that of the friend - is only referred to in memory, in indirect speech. Indeed, the driver has never met him in the flesh, all their 'communication' being by telephone:

A mi amigo no lo conozco en persona, sino sólo por la voz. Es una voz que nunca me ha gustado. Suena a noche perpetua. (p.98)

That the friend's voice is heard only by telephone furthers the sense in Gardea's work of a critique of technological modernity in Chihuahua explored in chapter one of this thesis. Yet, technology is not under a Romantic attack from Gardea, he makes no reference to a 'golden age' of pre-modern culture, and in this tale it is the *llano* and not the city that is a



threatening force. Rather, his interest is in how advancements in communication technologies - in this case the telephone - expose language to new techniques of control, relating the transmission of speech to changing socio-cultural forces.

In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan talks of media such as the telephone as 'extensions of man', capable of transforming the entire sensory field:

Since all media are fragments of ourselves extended into the public domain, the action upon us of any one medium tends to bring the other senses into play in a new relation. (p.266/267)

With the telephone, this 'new relation' is the inability to visualize while engaged in telecommunication. On the telephone, speaker and interlocutor are locked into language, other forms of communication such as facial and bodily gestures are not possible. The men's communication in the tale is 'blind', the signifying machine honed down to words alone - there is no semiotics of the face, or body to effect the way language is transmitted and received. McLuhan asks 'Why can we not visualize while telephoning?', to which he replies:

The telephone demands complete participation, unlike the written and printed page...With the telephone, there occurs the extension of ear and voice that is a kind of extra sensory perception.<sup>34</sup>

With the increased sensitivity of hearing and the simultaneous boosting of the vocal utterance, the voice on the telephone intensifies and extends its range while its ability to penetrate the listener's psyche is amplified to new extremes. Furthermore, unlike more passive auditory technologies, 'the phone is a participant form that demands a partner, with all the intensity of electric polarity. It simply will not act as a background instrument like radio.' (p.268)

The sonic form of words are electronically compressed by the process of transmission through a microphone and loudspeaker system, subtleties of tone and reflection flattened out to allow them to be channelled from a single source and received by a single ear. At



the same time, the electric energy and its sounds of static and connection enhance the penetrative qualities of the words which become invested with electrostatic force. The combination of compression and electrification further removes the communication from the human body, producing what Kafka called in his diaries, 'the ghostly element between people', generated in the 20th century by the telegraph, telephone, wireless and telegraphy.<sup>35</sup>

In 'En la caliente boca de la noche', this relationship between humans and electronic media is intensified by the clinical yet 'ghostly' way in which the phone is used as a means of command. It is exploited by the friend to lure the man out of his city environment and into a lethal trap. Like the boatmen's deception in 'El mueble', the driver has been lied to, seduced through language into actions that culminate in physical injury, even death. The driver cannot find his friend despite following the directions he was given over the phone to the letter. Indeed it is his unerring obedience and trust in the *word*, that brings about his fall. After initial relief that he may just be late, he becomes confused and uneasy. Just as he decides to return to the city, in the last sentences of the tale, he is suddenly stung by an unseen insect and then by another and another, until a whole swarm descends upon his body:

Oigo zumbar la noche. Otros insectos me atacan la espalda  
y las piernas, y los brazos, que no ceso de moverlos.  
(p.102)

While it would seem that the insects spontaneously materialize out of the darkness, an earlier reference to the driver's friend's interest in entomology situates them in a more sinister light. He has been passionately compiling unusual and ground breaking data on certain insects - 'zánganos'. The driver's fate is not then a chance or freak encounter with a swarm of insects, it is tied to the friend's invitation, the driver being the subject perhaps of a scientific experiment.

None of this is clear - Gardea gives no precise motives or reasons for the insects' attack. As in 'El mueble', he provides no secure basis or structure in the narrative for the



events that unfold. The reader is forced to engage and penetrate a passage into the texts, to assemble the linkages and forces at play. In the process of engagement, it becomes apparent that Gardea is less interested in narrating clear-cut scenarios of the cause and effects of characters motives and desires, and is more involved in the way these desires can be realised through deceptive, and physically absent means. This is neither an exercise in pedanticism, nor an attempt to be confusing for the sake of it; the process activates an understanding of the manipulative way in which forces of human desire are carried out in language. The driver has been subjected to the performativity of language, the friend's desire impressed upon him through a conversation. Language in 'En la caliente boca de la noche' is a trap, a line of force made up of commands that pull the driver to his fate. The directions he was given over the phone are not information for his benefit, but concealed orders of violent intent, the directions having been forced upon him as soon as he obeys the commands of the electrified voice emitted from the earpiece of the phone.

The title of the story, 'En la caliente boca de la noche', reveals much about Gardea's intent. The night is a mouth that seizes the driver in its teeth, the hot wind its threatening and asphyxiating breath, foretelling the clamping of the teeth in the stings and bites of the insects. Canetti maps a relationship between the human mouth and the development of the prison, the mouth being a space of containment and holding, while the teeth are the seizing and grinding agents and its restraining bars.<sup>36</sup> It is from that same mouth, that the directions were given to the driver over the phone, and the words it lets loose are like policemen sent to seize prisoners, in this case in the name of science. Canetti's approach to human teeth suggests a relationship with early weapons such as spears and arrows. Teeth have an order, regularity, efficiency and smoothness that became transferred in human development into arrow heads, knives and spears. Similarly, words were shaped with edges, as weapons to penetrate others and subdue their strength.

That the driver's fate is to be penetrated by stings is also curiously akin to Canetti's theory of the command, for each command leaves a sting behind in its victim:



The sting forms during the carrying out of the command. It detaches itself from the command and, as an exact image of this, imprints itself on the performer. It is small, hidden and unrecognized; its most essential characteristic, as we have already seen, is immutability. It remains isolated within the person concerned, a foreign body lodged in the flesh. However deep it may lie hidden, however incapsulated, it always remains a burden.<sup>37</sup>

The party invitation to the driver is a concealed sting that begins to work its way into his psyche and the blood of his veins the moment he accepts it, a hidden sentence of death. Yet as the tale draws to a close, the sting is no longer 'small' or 'hidden', rather it proliferates and becomes activated as the text allows its poison to flow freely. It mutates into the physical assault upon the driver, in the form of a swarm of flies. The space that the driver has been lured into is a hot mouthed prison of pain. The sentence of death is realised - the bites and stings of the insects, the metamorphosized and physical attributes of the sting in the command.

### *La canción de las mulas muertas*

In the novel *La canción de las mulas muertas*, as outlined in chapter one of this thesis, the antagonisms of two local bosses, Vargas and Góngora rarely reach states of physical violence. Their final confrontation is settled by a game of dominoes rather than a shoot out.<sup>38</sup> Yet, violence is a constant threat, carried in the transmission of words - 'order words' and 'sentences of death'. The *jefes* order their employees to spy on the enemy and pass messages of intimidation - 'stings' - to them. As the threats increase, they generate complex lines of confrontation and frontiers of power, the town becoming an architecture of linguistic violence. Like the asphyxiating climate of the *llano*, words put a choking stranglehold on the inhabitants bodies and psyches:



Quedó la lengua de Góngora como atorada, como sondeando al silencio y al corazón afligido del coime. (p.93)

At the same time, that which is not uttered - the unseen, unheard and silent - become the disquiet of threat and disguise. Paralinguistic gestures (corporeal and facial signs) proliferate in these moments of linguistic silence. Across the game of dominoes, 'Cuando Vargas volvió los ojos de nuevo a la mesa de juego, se topó con Góngora, que lo estaba mirando del mismo modo que la mañana del día anterior.' (p.51) In the novel *El diablo en el ojo*, Arana and Moy enter a similar paralinguistic confrontation:

Arana, lo tenía pintado en los ojos, armado hasta los dientes. Con la duda. El rayo de mi ojo le entraba al centro del alma. (p.79)

As Margo Glantz states, 'No es en balde en México se dice que las miradas matan.'<sup>39</sup>

Góngora gives instrumental weight to his verbal threats, by exhibiting his pistol in Vargas's presence. The gun is a tool of death, its visual appearance a gesture of Góngora's power, enforcing the violent intent of his words. While Góngora never actually turns it on Vargas - the death sentence being 'domesticated' by a wager on dominoes - his waiter Ramos, uses it to murder Gil. The incident exemplifies the relationship between language and violence, which in this case is not domesticated, as the death sentence is carried out to the full. The shooting occurs when Góngora leaves town and Gil goes to his bar to settle a score with the barman, Ramos. Before he assaults him, the two men fight linguistically, their questions and answers - 'answers and answers' - loaded statements of distrust:

-¡Ramos!  
Su voz era cálida, de supuestas prendas. En la oscuridad del Bar, la voz era el alba anunciando la mañana.  
-¡Ramos! -repitió impaciente-. Soy yo, Gil, venga.  
Una silla crujió adentro.  
-El patrón ya no está aquí -contestó el coime.  
-Sí, lo sé, Ramos.



-¿Se arrepintió y viene a tomarse el brandy que le invitaron, Gil?

Gil responds 'yes', but that really he has come to deliver Ramos a message from Góngora, to which Ramos replies:

-El que está mintiendo ahora es usted, Gil...Hace bastante que él se fue.

-Caminé luego por Placeres, esperando a que usted recobrara el ánimo, Ramos.

-Ya me recobré, Gil.

-Entonces, venga. Yo no me meto a esta boca de lobo.

-Bueno -dijo el coime. (p.101/102)

The continual repetition of names serves to intensify the antagonism between the men. The names act as markers that separate and distance the speakers from each other. They assist the aiming process of words as weapons - the locking of the sights of desire and will onto the target of the speakers intent.<sup>40</sup> Both men are exercising the flight-command, but neither one is stronger than the other, their sentences of death rebounding back as much as stinging and penetrating each other. Gardea describes Gil's death as a stark and inseparable extension of the conversation:

Una de las balas le quebró el pecho a Gil. La otra, mejor orientaba, le apagó para siempre en la cabeza el silbato del tren. (p.102)

There is no sudden shift to a heightened rhetorical voice, the words of Ramos and the cacophonic, staccatoed language mutating into the firing of the bullets, the physical threat of death finally realised.

In a short article, 'Los nombres que matan: Jesús Gardea', Margo Glantz analyses Gardea's use of unusual rural names. They are not, as she says 'common/rustic' names, but names given by 'common/rustic' people to their children: Orive, Trinitario, Saturno, Walterio, Ontiveros, Meneses, Borja, Arizpe, Brito Doval, Ugalde. Glantz suggests that the phonetic impact of these names shapes the tales their carriers partake in - 'Trinitario es un nombre detonante. Suena a nitroglicerina...', and in the story 'Trinitario', a man of



that name is violently murdered by three cloaked gunmen. Yet, the explosive event of the killing has a simultaneous beauty that echoes the combined violence and poetics of the name Trinitario:

...los hombres, sin soltar el borde de sus capas, abrieron  
los brazos como alas y lo cubrieron.  
-¿Y esta carpa...? -fue todo lo que alcanzó a decir el viejo  
bajo la sombra roja, y antes de las balas.<sup>41</sup>

In this way, names in Gardea's work are not symbolic, but performative words - 'becomings'. Rather than 'proper nouns', they are more like verbs, integral to the action of events.

### **Transculturation and Non-Human Phenomena**

As a child, Gardea spent most evenings in his parent's shop in Ciudad Delicias, listening to the agricultural labourers who would congregate there to drink, smoke and purchase goods. Years later, their language and voices would enter his work, not only in the form of words and phrases, but through their accents, inflexions and paralinguistic gestures of the face and body, and in their terse style of speaking that incorporated long intervals of silence. At the same time, the voices and writing actions of post-war writers from the USA (Faulkner, Hemingway, William Carlos Williams...) and Latin America (Rulfo, Onetti, José Lezama Lima...) penetrated the language of Gardea's novels and short stories. In this way, the texts became a complex assemblage of the local, rural communicative qualities of his native central Chihuahua and the modes of poetic, non-sequential narrative technique he inherited from the modernists.

The assemblage cannot be dissected into a polarised opposition of 'oral' and 'written' sources, in the way that Angel Rama is able with regionalist writers such as Rómulo Gallegos and D.F.Sarmiento.<sup>42</sup> Rather, it is shaped by a mutual transformation of cultures, in which Gardea creates Placeres as a multiple world of cultural hybridity. As



Rama would assert, using an anthropological term, Gardea's writing practice is 'transcultural'.<sup>43</sup> Yet, the joining and transformation of cultural forms is not always seamless - the language of descriptive passages and characters' speech often work against each other, to build linguistic tension. At the beginning of *El agua de las esferas* Doval/Gardea describes Moy drinking coffee:

Moy, con la cuchara, comenzaba a pegarle a su café.  
Remotos oía yo los golpecitos. Hacía un gesto. Volaba  
mi mano como un pájaro. Había mucho fulgor en la luz.  
Moy se había detenido.

The description is suddenly punctuated and ruptured by speech:

-Miente, Doval.  
Le miraba los ojos a Moy. Los otros levantando sus tazas  
bebían despacio. Moy continuaba:  
-Siempre.  
Sin prisa, yo también empezaba a beber...Afuera, el sol  
aplanaba al mundo.  
-No siempre -dije.  
Moy me acercaba su sombra. Me hablaba quedo.  
-Vamos, pues. (p.7)

However, this contrast in language is not an attempt to set up a cultural polemic of the oral/'crude'/'banal' ('low culture') of the characters' speech, against the poetic/literary expression of the author's descriptive writing ('high culture').<sup>44</sup> Instead, a continually changing, dynamic interplay of languages and voices courses through the text. Later in the novel, the language contrast is completely inverted. After stark and deceptively simple descriptive passages, Valencia's dialogue takes poetic flight:

-La fuerza -dijo- aparente. Los rayos de Bastidas, un  
préstamo. De la cal que tiembla en las paredes, y de la luz  
del sol. Nuestra tarea, cortar ese abastecimiento. Se  
apaga. Como un murmullo del aire, Dueñas. (p.41)

Valencia's speech is not an attempt to mirror the oral nature of the inhabitants of Delicias, but a hybrid symbiosis invented by Gardea, in which definitions of the 'literary' and the



'oral' and what they traditionally represent, are displaced and made redundant. The language symbiosis comes from Chihuahua's particular experience of modernization in the 20th century as discussed in chapter one of this thesis. This experience - of complex and hybrid cultural transformations, formed at the conjuncture of multiple coordinates and lines of socio-economic force - can be seen in the heterogeny of Gardea's texts. Just as the characters drink manufactured bottled soda in an isolated rural town in the *llano*, Gardea invites us to consume contemporary literary techniques in a place where there is apparently no literature.<sup>45</sup>

While the culture of Placeres in *La canción de las mulas muertas* is established through the sense of its geographical isolation, hybrid modernity, and machismo drinking culture, a silence surrounds the town's social structure outside the domains of the bar and the drink bottling factory. It is unclear where the characters go when they are not either working or drinking; they simply disappear with minimal reference to their movements and actions. Do they have families, and if so where are the women and children? Other inhabitants of the town pass by as shadows and unnamed bodies. Similarly, there appears to be no judicial authority overlooking the bar and factory - no clear imposition of state-law.<sup>46</sup> Yet, the apparent lack of information offered and the pervasive solitude of the town, highlights other forces at play. They are forces not readily accessible to historiographical or sociological interpretations clustering around energies that move in linguistic silence. When Carmelo asks how his ex-boss Vargas died, the answer given is that '-Nadie sabrá decirle...de qué murió Fausto Vargas, Carmelo. Nadie.' (p.105) But what can be related, is the noiseless play of light and air that surround him at his death:

-Esa mañana de septiembre, el sol es una seda, una luna.  
Se lo hago notar, Carmelo, para que vea Usted, rodeado  
de qué aire y de qué luz su señor Vargas empieza a morir.  
(p.106)



The absence of information and knowledge around Vargas's death does not signify an emptiness or *lack*, but the dominance of non-human phenomena such as light and air, that are not signifieds, concepts or representatives of anything human.

The movements and intensities of these phenomena prevent analysis of the texts through methods based upon rational knowledge, reason and logic in the tradition of western philosophy from Plato to Descartes. For as Gardea asks - 'En Placeres ¿no era todo imaginaciones? Las cosas oscurecían un rato la vida.' (p.71) There is no didactic authorial voice - the writer himself seems dizzy and blinded by the heat, sunlight and dust. At the same time, Octavio Paz's theory of language as a universal code that can be logically converted into blocks of meaning falters. Instead, *La canción de las mulas muertas*, as the title suggests, is a lyrical incantation; a ballad of death. The repetition of moving images - sunlight, dust, flies, shadows - give the tale a visual rhythm, juxtaposed with the sonic pulse of the language.<sup>47</sup>

This relocation of 'knowledge', prevents the traditional and hierarchical positing of 'natural' phenomena, beneath what Guattari calls semiotic machines and their dominant signifiers - grammar in linguistics, the phallus in psychoanalysis.<sup>48</sup> The semiotic machines employed by modern linguistics, situate human language as the prerequisite of all subjectivity and modes of communication. Taking this reductive process further, Jaques Lacan asserts that even the human unconscious is structured like a language.<sup>49</sup> Gardea, on the other hand, attempts to voice the unutterable - the sound of the sun's rays striking a building or body, the touch of a shadow, the moment when la 'sombra del llano, hablaba' (*El diablo en el ojo*, p.62) and Placeres enters 'Silencio entero, sin el menoscabo de las palabras.' (*Los músicos y el fuego*, p.15.) These events do not even function as non-verbal semiotic machines - such as the face - as they have no dominant signifiers, no machinic purpose or design. They are the cosmic, the non-human.



### Non-Verbal and Presignifying Communication

En Placeres, ¿cómo cantaría un ángel?<sup>50</sup>

To discern *who* is speaking or narrating at any moment in Gardea's novels is a complex and challenging exercise. The text slips almost imperceptibly between different voices; between first and third person narration, into fragments of conversation involving unnamed speakers, and through voices such as those that haunt the Paniagua family in *El tornavoz*, that operate somewhere between dreams and the psychic energy of the dead. (See chapter five for a fuller discussion of *El tornavoz*.) This destabilizing of language is intensified by Gardea's unpredictable shifts through time, breaking any linkage of chronology and narration, as memories and dreams collide with the present. The concept of narrative structure as a traditional system of ordered meaning in a novel cannot function, as the sequential progression of events is ruptured by the emergence of a plurality of voices that mesh together disparate spatiotemporal events. This constant flux in the state of language and its 'sources', breaks down the very concept of a speaking 'subject' in the Cartesian sense<sup>51</sup>, allowing what Bakhtin calls *dialogic voices* to proliferate:

Each word contains voices that are sometimes infinitely distant, unnamed, almost impersonal...almost undetectable, and voices resounding nearby and simultaneously.<sup>52</sup>

This movement toward non-subjectivity clashes with one of Saussure's language fundamentals: 'Speech...is an individual act of the will and the intelligence...never carried out by the collectivity: it is always individual, and the individual is always master of it.'<sup>53</sup> In Placeres, there is no such singular dictatorial voice to settle and direct the events taking place, no 'individual will' or 'master', and the author's subjective self slips away.



In contrast to the problems of interpretation thrown up by the plurality and subtle complexities of Bakhtin's *dialogic voices*, Saussure singularises and simplifies language communication through the privileging of 'articulation' in speech. He traces its impact through its Latin roots:

In Latin, the word *articulus* means 'member, part, subdivision in a sequence of things.' As regards language, articulation may refer to the division of the chain of speech into syllables, or to the division of the chain of meanings into meaningful units.<sup>54</sup>

But what of human utterances that cannot be subdivided into a sequence of syllables or individual words, that will not operate as 'parts' that join in order to become units of meaning? What of sounds that do not take the form of recognisable words and speech, that do not correspond to linguistic structures or codes, that mean nothing to the grammarian's ear?

Such utterances continually subvert the language of the text in Gardea's tales. In *El diablo en el ojo*, modes of non-articulate communication disjoint Saussure's 'chain of meaning':

Un gemido rompía del silencio, apagaba, como a una lámpara, el encendido aire del cuarto. (p.123)

The cry says nothing in linguistic terms - it is non-signifying and has no designated sender - but this does not mean that it is a redundant vocal expression. Guattari suggests an alternative to the privileging of semiotics in language in what he calls 'natural encoding' - a bodily process that produces no signification. The examples he uses are hormonal signals, and the crying of a child that can make its unhappiness clear 'without the benefit of a dictionary'.<sup>55</sup> Linguistic science has largely ignored this field, which Deleuze and Guattari call the *presignifying semiotic*; when corporeal and gestural expressions 'coexist heterogeneously with the vocal form'.<sup>56</sup> Yet the stoics addressed it when they attempted to '...distinguish the simple sound emitted by the larynx and the



articulatory muscles (an as-yet-inarticulate sound) from the articulate linguistic element and from the actual word which exists only insofar as it is related or relatable to a content.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the voices of Bakhtin's *dialogic imagination* emit 'a complex of natural cries and moans devoid of any linguistic (signifying) repeatability.'<sup>58</sup> If the sounds are unrepeatable in this way, they are uncodifiable in a structured sense - it would be impossible to convert their immeasurable rhythms and scarcely defined tones into units of signified meaning.

In Placeres, the dialogues of the inhabitants are usurped by a multitude of dislocated, *dialogic voices* - indistinct murmurs, groans and whispering, the sources of which are rarely clear. The sounds are emitted from a plural assemblage of 'speakers'; from dead souls, the invisible living and entities of unconscious memory. It is never obvious which of these 'speaks' at any particular moment, the voices combining in a plural language - a '*coro*', to use Gardea's word - that defies binary dualisms of the physical/spiritual, real/imaginary, culture/nature kind. As such, the sounds become more than Guattari's 'natural encodings'; they are the simultaneous emissions of 'supernatural', psychic and corporeal energies.

The voices are carried in the wind. They emerge from around street corners, out of cracks in the walls, and from across the desolate plains of the *llano*, soaking the acoustic space of the town with their utterances and cries - '*una fábrica de murmullos que crecen, que suben al cielo.*'<sup>59</sup> They are like the utterances of death and memory that haunt Comala in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. But unlike the voices of the dead in Rulfo's purgatory, they make no linguistic sense, use no articulated words<sup>60</sup> - they are 'devoid of any linguistic signifying repeatability.' Yet, like the child's cry, they communicate desire and implicate emotional force. In *El diablo en el ojo*, the dead swamp Placeres after the murder of Boscán, the noise of their 'voices' engulfing the perpetrators of the crime, sounding the town with their fury and desire for revenge:

Los diablos de los rincones, oscurecidos, a gemir quejas  
como las del diablo en el hoyo. (p.111)



In *Los músicos y el fuego*, the voices of memory and the dead erupt out of the howling of dogs that reverberates along the streets of Placeres at night. For Tanili, 'animal', 'human' and 'spiritual' communications have become an inseparable *asignifying* expression:

La endecha pasaba resonando a lo largo de puertas y ventanas; y luego, en la intermitencia, el suspiro del corifeo. Para Tanili, las endechas eran almas de olvidados muertos. Habían encontrado refugio en aquel coro y esa noche, en los filos del aullido, para levantarse de nuevo en la memoria de los vivos, estaban volviendo al mundo.  
(p.98)

The symbiotic relationship of the howling of the dogs and the dead, prevents any subdivision into separate 'members'; the sounds have neither a singular subjective origin, nor a clear signifying intent. Conversely, the inhabitants of Placeres do not 'receive' the voices through any single 'faculty' of perception. The words of the dead - unlike those of the linguist's controlled subjects - demand multiple responses that cross thresholds of psychic and mental, imaginary and sensory, corporeal and physical perception.

The semiotician C.S. Peirce, comments that 'a sign is something by knowing which we know something more'.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Umberto Eco contends that the 'map of semiosis...tells us who we are and how we think.'<sup>62</sup> These statements suggest that the relationship between signifier and signified generates *meaning* - 'a chain of meaning' - through semiotic process. Yet Gardea's texts continually slide away from such a process, shifting the very basis of this relationship and its particular generation of 'meaning'. In the story 'Después de la lluvia', the 'signifying chain' - the referral of one sign to another *ad infinitum* - that semiotics adheres to is broken. A waiter tries to send a simple order for bread and coffee to the kitchen. He calls out the order, but the door is shut, 'y el grito rebota y se revuelve, como un animal herido en la jaula del restaurancito.' (p.103.) Instead of conveying and carrying information and instead of signifying the



desires of the customer in the restaurant, language is trapped and rebounds in its environment, engulfing the two men -the waiter and customer - who at that same moment have physically attacked each other. The violence of the men and the trapped language are intertwined, both are injured and displaced by the confines of the building - the words fleeing round the room, while the two men fight.

The movement of sounds and words is crucial to this event. Saussure claims that, 'The linguistic signal being auditory in nature, has a temporal aspect...it occupies a certain temporal space, and...this space is measured in just one dimension: it is a line.'<sup>63</sup> In contrast, the auditory 'signal' of the waiter's words moves in multiple directions. Rather than operating along a 'chain' - a chain of command - or a fixed 'line', speech becomes resonant, harmonic and omnidirectional in physical and mental space. This intensifies in the novel *El tornavoz*, in which the space of Placeres is constructed as a resonant dome - a *tornavoz* - amplifying vocal expressions in a swirling, non-linear intensity. The disturbing voices the Paniagua family hear in the streets of the town echo and reverberate around the dome, the volume and harmonisation reaching saturation point at their deaths. Questions of source, sign and signification here are clumsy and reductive, as is the concept of language passing through space in a one-dimensional, linear pattern.

In Placeres, instead of reinforcing Eco's claim that the 'map of semiosis...tells us who we are and how we think', the conditions for such a map to be formulated and followed do not even exist. And if the map were made to exist, would it really inform 'us' *who* we are and *how* we think? Or would it merely stimulate cognitive action and the privileging of 'language-being'? What of communicative forces that move beyond these boundaries, that exist on the liminal planes of consciousness?

Perhaps Gardea is writing in what Deleuze calls the 'pass words' that run 'beneath order words...to transform the compositions of order into components of passage.'<sup>64</sup> While orders and commands are fired in dialogue, there is a simultaneous movement of language in other directions, through its vibrations in the shifting light of Placeres, 'un reino de penumbras' (p.56). In its refractions and rebounds, human psyches are shifted too, it is not clear where, but it is an escape, a running from the control of the command



and a rupturing of the subjective self. The command to flee, the death sentence of language is answered with flights and creations:

El rayo de las palabras liberó las manos de Amezcua; hizo  
polvo el yeso, añicos el cristal de la cárcel.<sup>65</sup>



## Notes

1. Julia Kristeva, *The Ethics of Linguistics*, p.236.
2. V.N.Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, p.73.
3. Ferdinand de Saussure, *The Object of Study*, p.3.
4. Noam Chomsky, *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, p.5.
5. Saussure, p.4.
6. Elias Canetti, Julia Kristeva, Angel Rama, M.M.Bakhtin, Deleuze and Guattari are notable exceptions to this trend.
7. Rowe, 'Paz, Fuentes and Lévi Strauss: The Creation of a Structuralist Orthodoxy'.
8. Octavio Paz, *Claude Lévi-Strauss o el nuevo festín de Esopo*, p.20.
9. Rowe.
10. Pierre Bourdieu. See 'Authorized Language: The social Conditions for the Effectiveness of Ritual Discourse', chapter 3 of *Language and Symbolic Power*.
11. Octavio Paz, *Corriente alterna*, p.9.
12. The similarities of 'El mueble' to Franz Kafka's *The Castle* are striking in this respect. Like K., the boatmen are outsiders, strangers to the community in which they are trying to work. Like K., their conversations repeatedly fail to break down social barriers, preventing them from discovering who has employed them and why. The intense heat and sunshine of the tale are an inverse, yet reflective experience of the freezing cold and deep snow of *The Castle*. The extremes of weather inject both texts with a cloying, stultifying and claustrophobic sense of community, which pervades language and conversation in particular. In Gardea, there is no monolithic structure such as the castle to dominate the community, rather it is the more hybrid Chihuahuan experience of modernity and commercial relationships that control the story's narration.
13. Volosinov, p.86.
14. Jean-Jaques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, on H.P.Grice, p.43.
15. *The Linguistics Encyclopedia*, ed. Kirsten Malmkjaer, p.356.
16. Gardea's continual use of language in these ways, is in contrast to the constructed stereotypes of the inhabitants of the northern plains of Mexico, particularly those of his native Chihuahua. The stereotype is that of the 'norteno risueño, francote, abierto'. (Quoted from the book jacket of *Los viernes de Lautaro*.) It has been built by the mass media, especially cinema and television, and in literary works.
17. Saussure, p.7. Such thinking was not new. In the 18th century, Jean Jacques Rousseau commented that speech is born 'of a mutual pact between men.' What changed radically in the late 19th/early 20th century was the way Saussure and Peirce illustrated the 'pact' through semiotics and semiology.
18. Saussure, p.6.
19. The term dialogic is used by Mikhail Bakhtin, to suggest the heterogeneous and multiple voices of the text, as opposed to traditional beliefs about the singularity of the dictatorial authorial voice. As such, the relationship between author and reader, is not a simple pressing of one person's subjectivity onto another, rather it is a complex interchange of uncontrollable voices, erupting from diverse social contexts of speech. This is discussed further in the last section of this chapter. See Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.
20. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.76.
21. An example of the question as statement or answer in Gardea's work is the conversation between two men in *El diablo en el ojo*, over the reported murder of Boscán:  
 '-¿Murió de veras Boscán, Orive?  
 Miraba Orive a Borja.  
 -Usted lo dijo.  
 -Uno dice cosas, Orive.' (p.42)
22. Deleuze and Guattari, p.77.
23. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, p.331.



24. Canetti, p.352.
25. Canetti, p.351.
26. Canetti, p.352.
27. Volosinov, p.94.
28. The contract killings were legitimised by the *Ley Quinto*, Chihuahua entering an era of paralegal violence on an unprecedented scale. The Mexican National supreme court found the 'Fifth Law' unconstitutional, both in the hiring of alien killers and in the potential murder of nomadic tribes who lived most of the year in Mexico and were considered Mexican citizens in legal and constitutional terms.
29. Cormac McCarthy gives a fictionalised account of this period of Chihuahuan history in the novel *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*.
30. Victor Orozco, *Las guerras indias en la historia de Chihuahua*, p.102.
31. Orozco, p.15.
32. As Deleuze and Guattari state, when one utters the word chariot, 'a chariot passes through the mouth'.
33. See J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (1962) and J.R. Searle, *The Philosophy of Language* (1971).
34. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p.267.
35. Quoted from Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, p.30.
36. Canetti.
37. Canetti, p.380. The sting penetrates children more than anyone. 'It is a miracle that they ever survive the pressure and do not collapse under the burden of the commands laid upon them by their parents and teachers.' (p.354.)
38. The title of the novel comes from domino playing in Mexico. In a letter dated July 19, 1982 to J. Ann Duncan, Gardea explains that double dominoes are known as 'mulas'. When the loser in the game still has some of these in his or her possession, the winner is said to 'ahorcarle las mulas.' Gardea continues, 'De ahí que, por extensión, por una licencia poética o metafórica...yo hablara de las mulas que Góngora le ahorcó a Fausto Vargas como de MULAS MUERTAS.' (Duncan, *Voices, Visions and a New Reality*, p.243.) There is also the sense that the employees of the two bosses are like mules; on the first page of the text they are shown as beasts of burden, humping heavy crates of drink under the relentless heat of the sun, while Vargas takes his leisure. The tale is a ballad of their exploitation and deaths.
39. Margo Glantz, 'Los nombres que matan: Jesús Gardea', p.57.
40. Although, as Duncan says, the repetition and continual assertion of names in speech is a linguistic pattern common to the culture of Gardea's native region.
41. 'Trinitario', from the collection *Septiembre y los otros días*, p.51.
42. Angel Rama, *Transculturación narrativa en América latina*. 7
43. Rama. 7
44. Duncan claims that Gardea's continual and lengthy descriptions of events such as opening a bottle are to highlight the 'banality' of life in Placeres. 'Banal' though for who? They are certainly not banal for the characters, or for Gardea whose use of such events is central to his relocation of conscious experience. In simple acts such as opening a bottle in 'El mueble', a character's perceptions, memories and consciousness can shift in crucial ways as the action triggers past experiences. What is 'banal' for Duncan, is the loaded mapping of the stories intent, the simple and the minimal letting loose complex reactions. The word serves no purpose but to illuminate the distance of the critic.
45. Indeed, in the corpus of Gardea's work, books are mentioned only once, in *El tornavoz*, when Jeremías attempts to look up the word 'tornavoz' in an old man's dictionary.
46. Their dislocation from the larger community, serves to intensify the feud at the bar, which becomes an isolated island oasis, within the larger oasis of Placeres in the desert. It is a solitude that is not limited to the men at the centre of the tale, for as Ramos says, '- Este llano de Placeres abarca a todo el mundo, señor Gongora. Es mucha la soledad.' (p.94)



47. The sense of *La canción de las mulas muertas* as a ballad, a musical narrative is difficult to assess. In one sense, it relates to the rural Mexican oral tradition exercised in ballad form. But what is also apparent is a relationship between music and possession, in terms of trance. The characters seem to simultaneously possess and be possessed by the text, in the rhythm of its language, in a non-subjective hypnotic state. They are hypnotised by the sun and its shifting light, by the rhythms of silence and clipped sound. They are captured and possessed by the music of silence and disquiet in Placeres. See Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*.

48. See Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*.

49. Jacques Lacan, *The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious*.

50. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.122.

51. '...Descartes proposed the thinking self as the first substantial area of knowledge - the subject - from the operations of which the independent existence of all other things must be deduced - as objects thrown before this consciousness'. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, p.309.

52. Mikhail Bakhtin *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, p.124.

53. Saussure, p.6/7.

54. Saussure, p.4.

55. Guattari, p.167. In childrens' development, linguists recognise that the 'informative function of language', the I've got something to tell you function, develops much later - around 22 months - than others such as the I want (instrumental), the let's pretend (imaginative) and the me and you (interactional) functions. See Kirsten Malmkjaer, 'Language acquisition' in *The Linguistics Encyclopedia*, p.250.

56. Deleuze and Guattari, p.117.

57. Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, p.30.

58. Bakhtin, p.105.

59. Gardea, *El tornavoz*, p.132.

60. It is only in *El tornavoz*, that linguistic 'sense' can be made out of the chorus of voices. As Jeremías explains to Colombino, the 'voces que bajaban del aire' utter '-Sólo una palabra, y siempre la misma...: Tornavoz.' (p.125) But this is an exception; the dead's communication can at no other point be interpreted as 'langue'.

61. Peirce, quoted by Eco, p.2.

62. Eco, p.45.

63. Saussure, *Nature of the Linguistic Sign*, p.13.

64. Deleuze and Guattari, p.110.

65. Gardea, *Los músicos y el fuego*, p.42.



## FOUR

### Light and Perception: Histories of Luminous Motion

Obra  
de pico  
y pala  
la canción  
del sol  
para las  
sombras.

Jesús Gardea<sup>1</sup>

But soft! what light through yonder window breaks?  
It speaks and yet says nothing.

William Shakespeare<sup>2</sup>

### Philosophies of Light

Light is a nonspecialist kind of energy or power that is  
identical with information and knowledge.

Marshall McLuhan<sup>3</sup>

Until the 18th Century, philosophies of light in western history were dominated by Christian metaphors - a vast assemblage of binary dualisms centred around images of light/dark, heaven/hell, good/evil, God/Satan. Light became the redeeming, pure and revelatory property of the Holy Spirit, opposed to the darkness of chaos and the devil's realm of hell. The parables of Christ in the New Testament gave this symbolic



opposition a timeless and universal quality, offering a moral path of opacity and sin, or luminescence and salvation - 'your light must shine before people, so they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven'.<sup>4</sup> While such metaphors remained prevalent in the 18th century, at the same time the new scientific philosophies, paradigms and publications of the Enlightenment period - most notably Isaac Newton's *Opticks* (1704) - appropriated light for a new symbolic function. Shifting the concept of illumination from the spiritual to the rational sphere, Enlightenment thinking joined light and logic in a devastating metaphor of visual order. Light, vision and Reason became synonymous - a universalised concept of existence radiating from the intellect of the subjective self and exercised through scientific practice.

The Irish philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1783) took this kind of thinking to a new extreme with his doctrine on vision, which stated that objects, such as stones or tables, are collections of 'ideas' that exist *only* in the mind. In this theory of perception, visual appearances are but 'signs' that trigger the mind's 'idea' of form and sight is merely the process of the brain generating perception. Berkeley had a profound influence on the phenomenologists of the 20th century. Merleau-Ponty states:

I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself...<sup>5</sup>

Through this approach, phenomenology unwittingly continued the Christian tradition of placing light on the side of the spirit, and of making consciousness into a beam of light, that could draw things out of the darkness of the unknown. The difference was that instead of making light an internal light - the spirit - phenomenology 'simply opened it on to the exterior, rather as if the intentionality of consciousness was the ray of an electric lamp.'<sup>6</sup>

At the turn of the century however, the French philosopher Henri Bergson began a vigorous critique of Berkeley and the foundations of phenomenology. In Bergson's words, Berkeley's 'mistake lay in believing that it was necessary to place matter within



the mind, and make it into a pure idea.' <sup>7</sup> He made a radical break from this tradition with what he called the *movement-image*, in which the identity of image and movement stems from the identity of matter and light - the image is movement, just as matter is light. As Deleuze states:

In the movement image there are not yet bodies or rigid lines, but only lines or figures of light...They are images in themselves. If they do not appear to anyone, that is to an eye, this is because light is not yet reflected or stopped...In other words, the eye is in things, in luminous images in themselves.<sup>8</sup>

In this way, things/objects are luminous by themselves, without any consciousness illuminating them, and consciousness is indistinguishable from the *thing*. In other words, and in direct contrast to Berkeley and the phenomenologists, 'it is not consciousness which is light, it is the set of images, or the light which is consciousness, immanent to matter.'<sup>9</sup> This shifts the field of perception beyond the limits of 'the internal motions of the brain', which as Bergson suggests is incapable of generating perception because, 'the brain is only an image among other images'.<sup>10</sup>

Like Bergson, Gardea's work seems to remove light from the control structures of metaphor imposed by both western Christianity and Enlightenment thinking. Similarly, it resists the more subtle attempts of Berkeley and the phenomenologists to reduce light to the intellect, 'the absolute source' of the mind. In doing so, Gardea counters the mythical symbolic linkage of light and knowledge (revelation), that continues to dominate philosophies of light in the 20th century. The linkage is by no means limited to European intellectual traditions. In the poem 'Vrindaban', the Mexican writer Octavio Paz muses:

Corría  
entre mis pensamientos encendidos  
Arriba las estrellas  
jardines serenísimos <sup>11</sup>



The poetry of these 'lighted thoughts' has a history, crossing through time, from post-Enlightenment thinking to *New Testament* rhetoric, to Plato's notion of the 'absolute being', who is 'all-seeing' in the luminous world.

In contrast to Paz's muse, light in Gardea's *Placeres* is a complex and unique phenomena, vital to human perception, rather than a metaphor of it. Consciousness and the perceptory field form around luminous moving images thrown up by the interaction of particles of matter and light. They become clouds of light - 'tolvaneras de nada, de pura luz.'<sup>12</sup> At dusk, in *La canción de las mulas muertas*, as the sun sets and the light dies, a golden intensity weighs heavily in the air. It moves through sunlight, dust and eyes:

Se iba la luz de Placeres. Del llano. Había oro muerto en el aire, en el polvo de las calles. Y los que salían de sus casas a verla partir, tenían oro en la pupila. (p.95)

The event is neither captured by the intellect, nor illuminated by human consciousness, as the light has become indistinguishable from consciousness - 'the eye is in things, in luminous images in themselves.'<sup>13</sup> This neither adheres to what Aristotle first proposed - that light rays travel from *observed* to *observer* - nor to phenomenology's virtual inversion of this rule.

In *Placeres*, sunlight actively seeks out the human eye - 'El sol trasplantado a la oscura tierra de la pupila...' - rather than the eye projecting a beam of light as consciousness.<sup>14</sup> The action is often a violent and painful experience for the inhabitants of the town. In *El agua de las esferas*, a man sitting at a café window is forced to cover his eyes with his hands, to protect himself from the intensities of sunlight that rush upon him:

Hacía guiños como si quisiera defenderse del colorido de sus brillantes. Puntas amarillas, y al rojo vivo, burlaban la empalizada de las pestañas, buscaban la pupila. (p.104)

He blinks with pain and is forced to shield his eyes with his hands, his eyelashes an inadequate defence against the sun's iridescence. His vision is filled with the colours



and movements of luminous images, lines and figures of light not yet bodies as they are not yet reflected or absorbed by matter. At this moment his perceptions occur: in the multiple action of the sensory network, in the colours and movements of light, a consciousness in the light. These perceptions are not generated by an 'inner' consciousness, rather light becomes consciousness immanent to matter - 'Lámpara de mi ojo, la luz de la calle.'<sup>15</sup> The dynamic of this perceptory field eclipses all other relationships in Gardea's work. Character interaction, communication in dialogue, narrative development and socio-historical processes are dominated by light, the stories becoming 'histories of luminous motion'<sup>16</sup>. What Gardea achieves, is that which José Lezama Lima attributes to the poet Luis de Góngora:

él ha creado en la poesía lo que pudiéramos llamar el  
tiempo de los objetos o los seres en la luz.<sup>17</sup>

When light strikes matter in *Placeres*, the effect is not read or deciphered by the eyes of human agents. Rather, it dazzles and blinds, with uncontrollable force - 'Luz blanca como nevada...' (*El agua de las esferas*, p.70), 'Nevada de alumbradas...' (*El diablo en el ojo*, p.110) In place of the sensory organ of the eye interpreting light and the visual scene, sunlight itself becomes 'el radiante nervio de la vitalidad.' (*El agua...*, p.96) In *El agua de las esferas*, light mesmerises Brito Doval as it plays across the surface of a metal bell:

Yo miraba al de la campanilla; estaba como hipnotizado  
con el juguete. Gota de fuego, la cabeza del badajo. (p.8)

This hypnosis breaks from the Cartesian theory of how the human body and mind interpret light. Descartes stated that 'light (lumen) is a pressure transmitted through the subtle matter to the retina and thence to the mind, which *orders* the sensations (lux).'

<sup>18</sup>  
For Brito Doval, the inverse of this occurs - light images seem to mesmerise and 'order' his mind.



### **Light in Mexican Culture: Violence and the Nahua Sun Gods**

-¿Qué sea preferible, Gutiérrez: si morir quemado por el azufre de los truenos o por el del sol ?<sup>19</sup>

The violence of the sun's activity in Placeres distances and distinguishes the luminous qualities of Gardea's work from the theories of Bergson and Deleuze, and European traditions in philosophy and art. The violence is specifically Mexican, Gardea's cultural inheritance perhaps of pre-Colombian mythic traditions of light and heat.

The sun was central to pre-Colombian Mexican cosmology. Nahua concepts of time and space were based on the five suns created by the gods, to give light and life to the world. The first four suns lacked powers of endurance, forcing the gods to create the Fifth sun which was generated by the self-sacrifice of the gods Tecuciztécatl and Nanahuatzin. They hurled themselves into a great fire and their burning forms flew to the sky, Tecuciztécatl becoming the moon and Nanahuatzin the sun. But Nanahuatzin was static in the sky and other gods had to sacrifice themselves to enable the new sun to pass through the heavens. Yet, even these sacrifices were insufficient; the sun had gained an unquenchable thirst for blood to enable its continual regeneration of power. Thus, the ritual of human sacrifice was initiated. As Enrique Florescano puts it, quoting from the chronicles, the gods resolved to make 'a sun that illuminated the earth and...this sun ate hearts and drank blood, and for this [it was necessary] for them to create war where hearts and blood could be had.'<sup>20</sup>

The nahua, particularly Aztec myth of the sun's thirst for blood seems to enter Gardea's Placeres in a cultural transmission over space and time. The entire town has been consumed by its desire - 'Los siglos de sol...habían devorado ya todo en Placeres.'<sup>21</sup> Examples of this kind of solar violence are numerous in Gardea's texts and it is as if the rays of light of the 5th sun have been let loose upon the inhabitants of Placeres. In the description above - the man in the cafe being blinded by the sun - it has the predatory force of a Nahua sun god; a desire to attack, to raid, to consume human



bodies and psyches. In *El agua de las esferas*, Dueñas is attacked by a coloured ray of light - 'Dueñas era mordido en la cabeza por el rayo azul.' (p.56) In the same novel, when a group of men leave the cover of the cafe, the sun violates their unprotected bodies - 'Chocan los rayos de luz foránea contra los cuerpos levantados que se mueven en dirección a la calle.' (p.24)<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in *Las luces del mundo* a man complains '-Me pica el sol', as he attempts to help two boys draw with chalk on the street. He can only continue to work with cloud cover, so great is the physical threat of the sun as it penetrates his body and senses. But the danger of exposure to sunlight is taken to its extreme in *La canción de las mulas muertas*, when Vargas is slowly killed by the sun's daily invasion of his nervous system. He dies:

De los ojos. De los nervios de la cabeza, que no  
soportaban el sol. (p.105)

In the novel *El diablo en el ojo*, the violent action of the sun is more closely interwoven with the narrative structure of the text. The tale begins with the murder of Boscán, by the much hated Borja. The act of killing sends Placeres into a state of shock, transforming the climate of the town into an eternal winter, a snow field, covered by a dim, clouded sky obscuring the sun. The town's inhabitants - living and dead - cry for revenge and plots are hatched to kill Borja. At the end of the novel, Borja is tracked down and shot in his sleep. It is not clear who commits the act, but after the event the bullet wound in Borja's head becomes an action of the sun:

Parecía de sol la mancha. Le habían chupado el calor los  
rayos. (p.131)

As it strikes the wound, the sunlight sucks, feeding on Borja's blood. It is as if the sun rather than the bullet made the penetration, puncturing Borja's skin and entering his body. With the revenge killing, the sun is replenished by blood. The gunshot opens a hole in the clouds allowing the sun to shine through, melting the snow:



El eco del disparo había abierto un boquete en las nubes.  
Regresaba el sol. La luz le ponía fuego a la nieve. (p.129)

In *El agua de las esferas*, there is possibly the closest reference between the sun and nahua cosmic mythology in Gardea's work. When Brito Doval complains about the intensity of the sun, Ugalde responds with folkloric beliefs:

-Este clima, Doval, no es para gente como usted. Cómo quiere desclavar el sol y arrumbarlo como a un tiliche. El es el que mantiene los cielos donde están. (p.89)

In this statement, Ugalde draws upon the nahua myth of the sun's position in the cosmos - its unique ability to maintain the structure of the sky and earth and to impose continuity and cohesion on the world. Indeed, as argued above, the sun's total domination of Placeres is like the power of a god - Quetzalcóatl and Huitzilopochtli who created fire and the first sun, and Nanahuatzin the embodiment of the Fifth sun. It controls time, space, air, matter, heat, light, energy, human perceptions and consciousness. But this is not an attempt to recreate a pre-Colombian religious philosophy in the 20th century. While the Aztecs gave the sun the function of imposing a new order upon the world out of the chaos of darkness - years were first counted from the first day of the sun - while it became the central force of an ordered creation and vitality, in Placeres the sun is out of control. No longer worshipped, free from the cultural structures and constraints of the Nahua, its creative powers become a destructive force, devastating the landscape and people. Instead of imposing a 'grand and predictable order', it is an unstable and erratic force - 'el sol es a veces como un loco, en su jaula del cielo.'<sup>23</sup> The Nahua duality's of heaven and earth, above and below, life and death, that rely upon the dominant opposition of light and darkness, are taken apart as 'el sol maniaco' attempts to break out of its 'cage in the sky'.<sup>24</sup>



### Geography and Light

While the light of Placeres can be related to more general Mexican mythic traditions and cosmological beliefs, the landscape of the Chihuahuan *llano* gives it a distinctly northern spatial dimension. As a child in Delicias, Gardea lived only seven blocks away from the border of *llano* and town, and the vast expanses of the plains became a space of freedom - an escape from parental pressure, school and the physical boundaries of Delicias. Leaving the town and its social structures and approaching the *llano*, Gardea entered the domain of the sun, an intense field of light. Like the Pampas for Sarmiento in Argentina, the *llano* was for Gardea a place of constantly shifting horizons.<sup>25</sup> Rather than the swaying of grasses in the wind, the movement is caused by the continuous play of light in haze, glare, heat waves and refracted colours. This movement intensifies at certain times of the year when storms dominate the land and skyscape. The plains become electrically charged and illuminated as forks of lightning cross the sky in *El diablo en el ojo* - 'Las chispas volando, entreverando sus colas de cometa, tejían una red luminosa.' (p.9) Even at night the *llano* is luminous, the sun's power becoming embodied in the energy of insects - 'miles de puntitos luminosos, hirviendo, moscas en el corazón del verano'.<sup>26</sup>

The light of the *llano* enters Gardea's work in a similar way to Van Gogh's experience of the light of the fields of Provence in southern France. Van Gogh 'painted' light to radiate physical forms and luminous images, exposing and letting loose the fields of energy which render those forms and images visible to human perception.<sup>27</sup> He desired his paintings to hang with 'the gravity of great sunlight effects'<sup>28</sup> and moved to Provence to exploit the unique light of southern France which had a 'chromatic intensity' he had never encountered before. He described it as 'A sun, a light, which for want of a better word I must call pale sulphur-yellow, pale lemon, gold.' From such descriptions, it is clear that while both seek to unleash the energy of the sun, the light of Van Gogh's and Gardea's worlds is radically different. In contrast to Provence, the light of Chihuahua is a malignant and dangerous force, fuelled and released by what Georges Bataille calls the



'superabundance of energy on the surface of the globe...solar radiation.'<sup>29</sup> This 'superabundance' is taken to what scientists have claimed is possibly its most extreme form in the American continent - in his place of work, Ciudad Juárez.

Gardea explains the extremity of light intensity in Juárez, where he began experimenting with writing in the 1970s, through the landscape that surrounds the city:

En Ciudad Juárez el desierto está muy cerca, a 30 kilómetros. Las dunas reflejan la luz: una claridad intolerable invade la ciudad. Es como vivir a orillas de un espejo.<sup>30</sup>

The desert he refers to is known as *Las Arenas de Salamayuca*, 'un gran espejo reflector de los rayos de luz...' As the sunlight reflects from the white sands of the desert to the city, it produces unique intensities of light:

estamos viviendo en un baño de luz muy intensa...Es un fenómeno luminoso que no está bien en otra parte de la república y posiblemente América Latina, me han dicho.<sup>31</sup>

As the light reflects from the Salamayuca desert to the streets of Juárez, the sun's energy becomes amplified to dangerous levels. Although Gardea is fascinated by this energy, its daily invasion of his senses triggers a vehement response - '...aquí en Juárez, la luz es cabrona, es cabrona.'<sup>32</sup> It took years of adjustment before he could walk the streets without the protection of dark glasses, technological armour against the sun.

Like Juárez, Placeres is illuminated by the reflected light of the surrounding landscape - the *llano* - and the white dust that coats its streets and buildings. In *El diablo en el ojo*, it transforms the architecture of the town into a luminous mass - 'Las casas eran como una cordillera con fuego de oro en el filo...' (p.108) Gardea compares the intensity of the invading rays of light with lasers (*light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation*) - 'El rayo láser es la misma luz, pero...está absolutamente estructurada, o sea como una luz apretada...' <sup>33</sup> The shafts of sunlight that strike Placeres are structured and focused in this way - they have a 'presencia física', which impacts with matter and human flesh: 'Ardía la luz sobre el piso, rebotaban sus rayos en los cuerpos.'<sup>34</sup>



This 'physical presence' of light breaks with the traditional interpretations of light in western culture outlined at the beginning of this chapter. For example, in Christian mythology light is perceived in passive, non-physical ways - an untouchable, ungraspable and intangible ideal. This passivity stretches back to Medieval times and beyond, when light was conceived of as the measure of Spirit, the means of religious reification, and the guiding source of redemption. With the Enlightenment, it became a metaphor of Truth and Knowledge, through the rationale of visual clarity. However, this was a reality made to be seen rather than felt. In contrast, when Gardea describes light as lasers, it is as rays striking bodies with the force of weapons, in a violent and corporeal beauty.

Modern scientists describe the physicality of light as electromagnetic radiation capable of producing visual sensation. The radiation is comprised of electromagnetic waves - 'travelling disturbances in space produced by the accelerator of an electric charge.' The electric energy of these disturbances is generated from the separation or movement of charged particles, such as electrons and protons. This physicality of light, the movements and accelerations of particles, charges the environment of Placeres - 'el aire pulsados, del sol'.<sup>35</sup> It heats the town into a suffocating and burning zone - 'El infierno de la calle...'<sup>36</sup>, disturbing the inhabitants' psyches as well as bodies - 'el calor atrofiaba las mentes'.<sup>37</sup> The heat is an invisible action that effects human agents outside the realms of light and visual experience. As Charles Olson states, heat has a direct and non-symbolic power:

heat, all but heat, is symbolic, and thus all but heat is reductive.<sup>38</sup>

It is non-symbolic because heat is the excitation of molecules that only become light and only enter the visual field at a certain level of intensity. In celebrating this heat that exists prior to light, Olson avoids the *image* and its reductive symbolic qualities. Gardea achieves something similar in the short story discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, 'En la caliente boca de la noche', in which a man drives through the



claustrophobic heat of the *llano* at night. There is no light to generate the tension of the tale - the *llano* is in almost total darkness - and the heat has no symbolic images. Yet the man is increasingly disturbed by its suffocating energy; it controls his actions and fears as he moves deeper into the *llano*, draining his own energy and drawing him towards possible death.

### The Gaze

Images are made visible to the human senses by the interaction of light and matter, in a combination of reflected and absorbed light. Yet the majority of art and literary criticism concentrates on what light illuminates, rather than light itself, or the relationship between light and matter. This ignores what artists particularly since Carravaggio<sup>39</sup> have long known - that 'Light is as important for the perception of form as is the matter of which form is made.'<sup>40</sup> This situation owes much to the qualities of light that cannot be analysed through interpretative structures that have been in vogue since the 1960s and before. It cannot be approached through *linguistics* - light has no 'language' structure, no 'chains of meaning': *semiotics* - light cannot be reduced to a 'system of signs': *psychoanalysis* - it has no dominant signifiers. Yet from within the latter field, Jaques Lacan attempts an alternative perspective of light to Bergson's. Lacan asserts that to ignore light, is to be ignorant of the relationship of eye to visual form, and the wider network of the physical and mental act of seeing. This by-passes the 'essence of the relation between appearance and being', or the relationship between seeing and the self.<sup>41</sup> The result of this is that the image in the field of vision is separated from both conscious and unconscious drives - there is no analysis of 'subject and the domain of vision.' (p.97)

Lacan suggests that there is desire in the very act of looking and seeing, a desire he calls the 'gaze' motivated by the 'scopic drive'. The gaze is 'something prior to...[the] eye', it has a 'pre-existence' over the eye for, 'the eye is only a metaphor of something that I would prefer to call the seer's shoot (*pousse*)'. (p.72) In *La canción de las mulas*



*muertas*, Vargas is surrounded by a swarm of bees, but 'Vargas no las miraba; miraba un mundo invisible, paralelo al de sus ojos.' (p.46) In this instance the eye has been disarmed, Gardea preventing its optical 'shoot', and the 'pre-existence' of the gaze comes to the fore.

The desire of the gaze may be a conscious one, but its greater force flows as Lacan states, from 'the underside of consciousness' (p.83):

In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision...something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it - that is what we call the gaze. (p.73)

In the gaze, there is a 'sliding away of the subject', as experienced most intensely in dreams, when the dreamer's position is 'someone who does not see' and the subjective self falls away.<sup>42</sup> Placeres is perhaps a dreamscape of this kind, inhabited by 'sonámbulos', the 'shoot' of whose eyes has been disarmed. The 'gaze' dominates their visual perceptions, in which a continual 'sliding away of the subject is apparent'. The town exists in a state 'Entre dormido y despierto'<sup>43</sup>, defying visual logic :

En Placeres ¿no era todo imaginaciones? Las cosas oscurecían un rato la vida. Las tolvánicas de marzo pasaban, se desbarataban lejos, para nadie. Para nada.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast, as discussed in chapter two, the designer of Ciudad Delicias, Ing. D. Carlos G. Blake, attempted to impose a visual logic of space on the inhabitants of the town, through building the streets and buildings in a rigid geometric order. Lacan calls this the 'geometral dimension', in which the 'subject is caught, manipulated, captured, in the field of vision.' (p.92) But this kind of capture is eluded in Placeres - visual logic becomes weakened by the gaze, the eye drawn away from linear planes by:

the point of light - the point of irradiation, the play of light, fire, the source from which reflections pour forth. Light may travel in a straight line, but it is refracted, diffused, it



floods, it fills - the eye is a sort of bowl - it flows over, too. (p.94)

Rather than operating as a 'geometral eye-point', the gaze takes up the spills and leaks of the eye, posing the question of 'a quite different eye...', formed by scopic drives. (p.89) In this way, the 'subject' - the looker - can neither orientate themselves simply through visual logic, nor be orientated by the space production techniques of a planner such as Blake.<sup>45</sup> Lacan elucidates this when he says light causes:

the shimmering of a surface that is not, in advance, situated for me in its distance. This introduces...the depth of field, with all its ambiguity and variability, which is in no way mastered by me. It is rather it that grasps me, solicits me at every moment, and makes of the landscape something other than a landscape, something other than what I have called the picture. (p.96)

This action of light images *grasping* and *soliciting* the perceptions of the human agent and thereby transforming the entire visual field, echoes Bergson's theory of light and consciousness. An event of this kind occurs in *Los músicos y el fuego*, when Ugarte attempts to locate Barbosa by looking to the light of the sky:

Ugarte, por entender a fondo las razones del otro, miró con calma, al cielo. La luz del planeta visto directamente, un fogonazo. Todos los colores, y todas las explosiones que habían sido en el mundo, como una algarada le entraron a Ugarte a los ojos; le hicieron perder el equilibrio. (p.35)

The loss of equilibrium is the loss of geometral visual perspective in space, the displacing of linear horizons, and it prevents Ugarte from locating Barbosa. In an attempt to regain perspective, he shuts his eyes to block out the light and then opens them again, but the light has already entered and dominated his gaze - 'La girándula de los colores, cuando él abrió los ojos, continuaba viva, impidiéndole la visión.' (p.35) *Object* and *subject* 'slip away' in the event, the scene a collection of luminous images; lines and figures of colour and light that move beyond the limits of Cartesian subjectification.



### 'Light-Being' and William Faulkner

William Faulkner, among other modern US authors - Hemingway, Flannery O'Connor, William Carlos Williams - had a crucial influence on Gardea's early writing. This is unsurprising given that as Deleuze states Faulkner is 'literature's greatest luminist'.<sup>46</sup> For Deleuze, Faulkner's texts are worlds of 'light-being' as opposed to 'language-being'. In them, he conjures up:

a host of scenes which create reflections, flashes, shimmerings, visibilities varying according to the time and the season, which distribute the descriptions in a light-being... <sup>47</sup>

Arguably, Gardea exceeds Faulkner in this respect. In *The Sound and the Fury*, light is described as 'supine and tranquil'. (p.147) Faulkner paints it with washes of colour - 'Behind him [Quentin] the yellow light lay like a wash of paint on the roof of the house.' (p.145) Light operates from 'behind the scenes', as a static backdrop to the action of an event. In contrast, in Gardea's work there are no luminous washes - light is direct and active, moving in lines and figures, generating spatiotemporal dimensions. Indeed, light *becomes* the event, irreducible to human actions. ✓

The contrast is clear from a comparison of the short story, 'La guitarra' from the collection *De alba sombría*, and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. In 'La guitarra', sunlight moves autonomously across Miguel's bed:

En mi ausencia, el sol bajó de la cama, resbaló por el latón, caminó pasito por el piso, por mi cuerpo, hasta alcanzar la ventana y saltar a la calle. (p.147)

Miguel's will/self is absent from the action, whereas in *The Sound and the Fury*, human will is the dominant force. Quentin describes his walk through the woods:



I went up through the gate...I went up the hill...I lifted my hand...I stopped in the green and yellow light. (p.145)

The repetition of the *I*, forces Quentin to move as a 'character,' a subjective being operating in front of washes of colour, while in Placeres light is the medium in which characters occur. Like the field in Robert Duncan's *The Opening of the Field*, Placeres becomes 'a made place, created by light/ wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.'<sup>48</sup> Taking this further, Gardea states of the sun, 'Trato incluso de sacarlo físicamente y quizá sea mi personaje principal.'<sup>49</sup> The inhabitants of Placeres are like objects placed/sacrificed to the light, with which it can interact and make itself known to the reader. This is the opposite of Faulkner's 'steady, even though monotonous sunlight...'<sup>50</sup> In Faulkner, light falls: in Gardea it hurls itself at the earth, penetrating the inhabitants of Placeres with non-human action. The impact of this penetration on the peoples daily life is immense, shaping the psycho-spiritual history of the entire town.

Gardea attempts to grasp light events, to experience them in tactile ways, while Faulkner contents himself with the description of light scenes. Deleuze states that 'the description-scene is the regulation unique to visibilities' as opposed to the 'statement-curve which is the regulation unique to readabilities', but Gardea moves beyond both the visual and the readable, in his desire for a wider corporeal response system.<sup>51</sup>

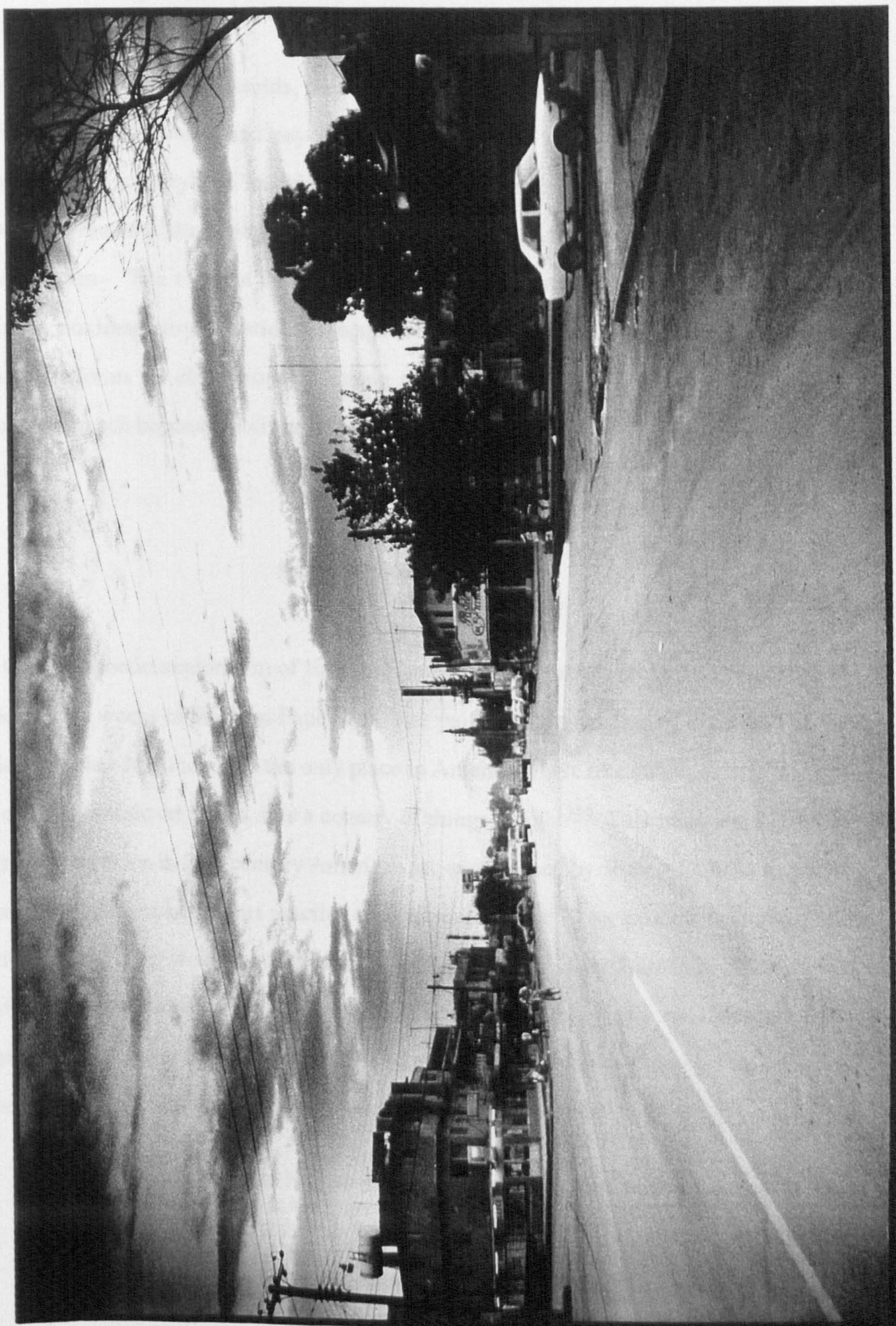
Faulkner and Gardea explore the effects of twilight on human conscious experience - a psycho-optical relationship. Quentin describes it in the following way:

I could see the twilight again, that quality of light as if time had stopped for a while...grey half-light where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical... (p.146/147)

Yet this is still a description dealing with *visibilities* - 'I could see...' In *El agua de las esferas*, the waiter Ugalde is caught in a similar half-light. As he looks onto the street from the cafe:



Twilight in Ciudad Delicias, September 1993.





el mundo externo, y el de adentro, sumergidos como a la  
espera de algo, quietos en las penumbras del crepúsculo.  
(p.143)

With the submerging of worlds, the visual image disappears and the twilight floods the wider sensual network and psychological being, and the eye as an ocular bowl overflows. 'Visibility' and 'readability' become inadequate here - they cannot capture the twilight event as it alters the parameters of visual perception. As an ancient Chihuahuan belief states - 'The twilight is the crack between the worlds'.<sup>52</sup> The crack is neither a visible, nor imaginary interstice, but a spatiotemporal and spiritual doorway, a threshold that transforms the dimensions of human perception. Quentin, on the other hand, is unable to reach beyond a horizon of seeing.

### Synaesthetic Perception

Gardea's poetic exploration of light and perception is perhaps closer to US art than to the literary works of William Faulkner. The painter Marsden Harley once said of the plains of New Mexico - 'It is the only place in America where true colour exists. It is not a country of light on things, it is a country of things in light.'<sup>53</sup> This statement illustrates a radical tradition in 20th century American art, summarised by Robert Duncan as a shift from the 'visual spirit' of art practice to a 'muscular spirit'. (An extreme example of the 'visual spirit' in art would be 14th century Italian painting.) Like Gardea in *Placeres*, US artists were no longer trying to capture luminous effects on objects and landscapes, but the dynamic, physical interaction of light and matter. Duncan expresses this concern through Olson's *Maximus* and its reference to Marsden Harley:

Olson points to Marsden Harley: 'to get that rock in paint'  
- a getting, a taking grasp, a hand that is the eye. 'But  
what he did with that bald jaw of stone.' 'Did with' not  
'saw in'. And here Olson comes to the hand - Harley's  
hand, Jake's hand: 'a man's hands, / as his eyes.'<sup>54</sup>



The visual scene is no longer limited to the eye or optic vision: the painting is grasped/experienced by the entire body as a field of perception and action. As the title of the essay states, 'The Hand is Intimate to the Measurements of the eye'.<sup>55</sup>

More than breaking art tradition, the 'muscular spirit' challenges scientific traditions of the visual which have been dominated by the Newtonian school of optics and its continuity over the centuries. Optics in tandem with physiology, isolated each organ of the senses - ear, eye, mouth, nose, skin - and their function for the brain, privileging sight above all other sensory experiences. As one post-war optic scientist states - 'The eye is our noblest sense organ.'<sup>56</sup> The separation of the senses into independent response mechanisms has been further instituted by physicians and neurologists who have assumed that the brain is a passive receiver and the senses come in separate channels that feed into different parts of the brain's cerebral cortex:

The senses convert stimuli like light, sound and pressure into electro-chemical impulses that are channelled to clusters of cells in different parts of the cerebral cortex - the brain's thin outer layer. For example, hearing information is carried to nerve cells in the auditory cortex of the brain, while information from the eyes travels to nerve cells in the visual cortex.<sup>57</sup>

In Placeres however, the sensory organs cannot be split apart in this way. Light events are perceived through the entire body as a field of perception and the visual cannot be maintained as either pure or independent - it becomes complicated and transformed by the simultaneity of multiple sensory responses. In 'La guitarra', the patient Miguel looks out of his window into the night, but the light of the moon is *felt* and *smelled* as much as *seen*:

Asomé las narices al aire de la calle, y entonces, desde alguna parte del cielo, me llegó el olor a luna...La luna estaba hinchándose en el cielo como una semilla. Yo no la podía ver, pero la sentía. (p.149)



Similarly, in *El diablo en el ojo* a group of men respond to lightning not only through sight, but through taste - 'sentíamos en la boca el sabor de los relámpagos.' (p.58) The intense image of light energy moving rapidly through the sky crosses from the eyes to the sensory zone of the tongue, as Gardea inverts the senses. In *El tornavoz*, the inversion occurs across the visual and the audible fields, when a man *hears* the action of light in the extreme silence of the *llano* :

No muy lejos escucho la masa de luz estrellándose contra algo. (p.76)

The scientific, linear process of the image captured by the eye and interpreted by the brain, and the visual logic it prompted in the modernist trio of 'readability - visibility - intelligibility', begins to falter and break down.<sup>58</sup> The visual world rendered by optical process no longer exists as a totalising reality; a wider sensory intelligence pulls it apart. A movement is made away from light energy referred to (seen), towards an energy embodied in the work (felt).

I asked Gardea about sensual inversion in his work, particularly through light stimuli. He responded by stating that the physical nature of light rays enables it to carry information:

un información de sonido, de visión, de olor, de aroma...¿por qué no? <sup>59</sup>

The effect of powerful light rays such as those that strike Juárez and Delicias upon physical objects/matter causes disturbance to the stability of their form, which can give off an odour or a sound. By intensifying this action and sensitising human responses to it, light penetrates the entire body as perceptory field. I then suggested to Gardea that in his work, the five senses were not separated into fixed areas of stimulation, and by allowing his characters to experience it through smell, sound and touch he was seeking to challenge and transform sensory preconceptions. He replied that he simply desired the



connection and interaction of each sense with the others, but in doing so he challenges the history of the 'logic of visualisation' and its inheritance of the need for seeing to be first separated and then elevated above all other sensory experiences.

The mixing and interaction of what scientists have traditionally accepted to be separate sensory functions, has its own tradition in *synaesthesia*, which has been debated for 300 years. In the early 19th century it appealed to Europe's artistic and bohemian circles in a response to the rigidity of post-Enlightenment science.<sup>60</sup> Baudelaire and Rimbaud were prominent exponents, and later Vladimir Nabokov described his 'coloured hearing', which gave the sounds of letters of the alphabet their own distinctive colours. Scientists responded by denouncing synaesthesia as 'just another poetic way of using language to describe the world around us' - a function of *metaphor*. Yet, for the synaesthete, metaphors take on a literal truth: they are not ways of describing one sensation through another but an interactive reality. When Paniagua *hears* light strike matter in the novel *El tornavoz*, it is not an allegory or trope describing something else, nor an invention for 'poetic' technique, but what he hears. For the synaesthetic Russian Jew Shereshevski, Paniagua's experience is almost reversed. Every sound that he heard immediately produced an experience of light and colour and a sense of taste and touch.<sup>61</sup>

In the last decade, two independent groups of neurologists have accepted the existence of synaesthesia, entering into new research to attempt a scientific analysis. In London, Dr Simon Baron-Cohen at the Charing Cross Hospital posits that synaesthesia exists in a minority of people whose brains have 'abnormal connections' between sensory areas that normally function independently. Thus, hearing light images would be due to connections between the auditory cortex and the visual cortex, causing light to be processed as sound. In contrast, Dr Richard Cytowic of Washington DC states that synaesthesia shatters the traditional model of the brain as an operation of physically separate sense centres. Abandoning the cortex, Cytowic focuses on an area of the brain that lies underneath - the *limbic* brain - which deals with emotion and memory. Cytowic believes that while sensory information is processed initially in the cortex, it



simultaneously passes to and from the limbic brain in connections that cause the information to become mixed and interactive:

There's a kind of togetherness of all the senses in this limbic system, so that all of us are really synaesthetes, and it's only a handful of people in which this union of the senses becomes conscious that are aware of their synaesthesia.<sup>62</sup>

Arguably, Gardea's character Medina is such a person. In *Los músicos y el fuego*, he 'watches' the sun go down:

Se hundía el sol de agosto en el rojo borbollón de seda y en los pistolos cantantes, con un gemido enorme de triunfo; de toro. Reventaban los ecos en el pecho del comerciante, le rizaban, como en un amago de tempestad, la sangre y la memoria de sus antiguos amores. (p.8)

Light has become sonorous - in the cry of the sun as it sets. The sound penetrates Medina's body as much as the image. Together they echo within his chest, interacting with his emotions and memories.

Cytowic's radical attack on traditional scientific knowledge and his claim that all humans are synaesthetes - albeit unconsciously - echoes what Merleau-Ponty once stated:

Synaesthetic experience is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear and generally speaking, feel...<sup>63</sup>

Babies have not yet 'unlearned' how to see, hear, feel; they are not yet *trained* to order their senses into rigid blocks of experience. As Dr Daphne Maurer (McMaster University, Ontario) states - 'Instead of perceiving discrete objects they perceive energy, changes in energy, not knowing whether the energy is coming through the nose, the mouth or the eyes.'<sup>64</sup> In *El agua de las esferas*, Brito Doval perceives energy in a similar way, when he 'sees' the midday sun colliding with the horizon:



Miraba, por la alta ventana del cuarto, la luz del cielo, brillando en el aire del mediodía como un papel de aluminio. El silencio adentro me permitía oír cómo el sol, en los bordes del horizonte, trizaba al papel. El mundo alrededor estaba envuelto en esta lluvia, niebla de coruscantes. (p.52)

Doval's sensations - like that of a baby's - are produced by continuous and discontinuous flows of energy that are not mentally ordered. Distortions and shimmerings of light spill uncontrollably from the visual senses to the acoustic and back again.<sup>65</sup>

Locked in 19th century tradition, Dr Baron-Cohen, suggests that the separation of the senses is part of an evolutionary development of the brain to achieve more 'efficient processing, and when the senses are mixed this produces disadvantages, even confusion.'<sup>66</sup> In contrast, Yaqui shamans of Chihuahua, actively seek and explore this 'confusion' of the senses and consciousness, through the use of hallucinogenic stimulants such as *peyote*. Under the influence of peyote, administered by the Yaqui 'Don Juan', Carlos Castaneda's visceral, visual and audio worlds interact in flashes of light and dark:

I realised that the brightness corresponded to my heart's diastole, and the darkness to its systole. The world changed from bright to dark to bright again with every beat of my heart...the strange sound I heard before became audible again...<sup>67</sup>

Mescaline has a similar capacity to disrupt the senses - 'The barking of a dog is found to attract light in an indescribable way, and is re-echoed in the right foot.'<sup>68</sup> For the Yaqui, and Gardea, it is the 'efficient processing' of the mind that is 'disadvantageous', rather than the 'confusion', as it limits perception to rigid sensory barriers. In the *llanos* of Chihuahua these barriers - constructed by scientists' adherence to the evolutionary paradigm - are collapsed in the liminal flights of Yaqui ritual hallucination and the perceptory worlds of the inhabitants of Placeres. As Don Juan puts it - 'clarity is almost a mistake. And a moment will come when [a person] will understand that his clarity was only a point before his eyes.'<sup>69</sup>



### Power: Artificial Light and Social Control

It was not until 1946 that electric light came to Ciudad Delicias. Gardea was seven years old at the time and he recollects the moment of artificial illumination when the town's electric power system was turned on for the first time. New qualities of light were brought to Delicias with the advent of electricity, yet they are often absent from Gardea's fiction. This absence of electric light gives one of the few concrete suggestions of the historical time in which the stories of Placeres are set - between 1933 (year of founding of Delicias) and 1946 (year of electricity). The source of light evident in a story can define its temporality. For example, in the tales 'Después de la lluvia', 'En la caliente boca de la noche', and *La canción de las mulas muertas* there are references to electric light suggesting a post 1946 setting.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, in 'La guitarra', *Los músicos y el fuego*, *El tornavoz* and *El agua de las esferas*, night time illumination is supplied solely by candles and Coleman paraffin lamps. In *El tornavoz*, the protagonist is born in the first paragraph of the book under the light of a Coleman lamp.

Gardea handles artificial light in a subtle yet tellingly different way to that of natural/sun light. Electric light is rarely mentioned even in the post 1946 tales, in contrast to the constant references to sun and moon light. Artificial light is not imbued with the physical and dynamic forces of sunlight to shape the social, physical and psychological space of Placeres. In 'Después de la lluvia' it is only brought to bear in a negative sense, in the form of a power cut, caused by natural forces - excessive rain fall. Without electric light, the doctor is forced to rely on other senses to find his way round the hotel he is staying in, and his imagination begins to take him elsewhere, beyond the visual logic that an electric bulb can supply at night. As he descends the stairs of the hotel, he feels as if he is entering the sunken depths of the 'reino de los muertos. La idea no le gusta. Y comienza a buscar, en la pared, un apagador, con mano ávida.'(p.109) He locates the switch but it is useless and he remains in a world of shadows and confusion. Non-



Five years after the arrival of electricity in Delicias (1946), electric street lights were introduced.

*Noche radiante en la que esparció sus primeros fulgores la luz del alumbrado público el sábado 3 de febrero de 1951. La instalación se hizo con cable armado subterráneo, lámparas de 400 Wtts. c/u. y con una intensidad de 21, 000 lumens. (Photograph and text from the Rotary Club's Ciudad Delicias: xxv aniversario.)*





electric sources of luminescence dominate the scene, unsettling the 'modern' psyche of the doctor.

Perhaps Gardea distrusts artificial light. In the pre-1946, pre-electricity tale *Los músicos y el fuego*, the light of a Coleman lamp is described as a controlling force - 'La luz era el orden.' (p.32) This contrasts with the free flowing, unstructured rays of sunlight that dominate the town without imposing an order upon it. In 'La guitarra', the Coleman lamp is referred to in terms of the human ownership and control of light. The patient Miguel comments of the hospital:

Nuestra única fuente de luz en la casa era una lámpara de petróleo. Pero la lámpara nunca salía de la cocina. Los locos la habían pegado para siempre a la tabla de la mesa.  
(p.149)

'Los locos' are the hospital administrators who police the institution, Miguel's routines and his environment. Their attempt at fixing, confining and controlling the source of luminescence is an exercise of power. By nailing the only lamp down in the kitchen, where the patients are barred from entry, they command the visual world of the nocturnal hospital.

The history of artificial light reveals relationships of power and wealth: to hold the key to light is to have access to mental 'enlightenment' and to continue business and pleasure in a controlled luminous environment independent from the sun. Artificial lights from medieval candles to late 20th century neons have become symbols of wealth, decadence and control; their ownership symbolic of social power. In Mexico, with its hybrid and uneven modernization, these relationships of light and social power are extremely intense, especially in remote areas such as the *llanos* of Chihuahua.<sup>71</sup> Juan Rulfo's short story 'En la madrugada' from the collection *El llano en llamas*, is set in a similarly isolated space - the plains of Jalisco. In the story, a murdered land owner Justo Brambila is referred to as 'el dueño de la luz' (p.75), his death marked and honoured by switching off the electric lights at night. In contrast, the killer - one of Brambila's ranch hands Esteban - operates in the fog and half-light. His world is not controlled by electric light -



he has no access to it, due to his social position. In the morning haze he loses control in violent outbursts of emotion, culminating in the killing of his boss. Like Esteban, Miguel in 'La guitarra' is condemned to 'las penumbras', and it is here that Gardea, like Rulfo, reaches beyond visual logic. Miguel feels the moon, and in its light he explores the shape and disturbing beauty of the guitar's mark on his bedroom wall. In 'las penumbras', the image of light becomes tactile and corporeal, as Miguel places the palm of his hand on the luminous shape of the guitar:

La pared, en ese lugar, tenía la consistencia de la carne.  
No me pareció absurdo esto. Era como si yo hubiera  
estado esperando encontrarme con una cosa así. (p.150)

### Language and Light

El grito roza a Colombino; y cuando lo tocan los rayos del  
sol, se incendia y chisporrotea como una bengala.<sup>72</sup>

Lefebvre links the history of the philosophy of light and the visual to the late 20th century modernist triad or trinity, of 'readability-visibility-intelligibility'.<sup>73</sup> This triad incorporates the developments of centuries of changing philosophies on the visual, culminating in the post-Enlightenment, Positivist tradition. The visual, knowledge and language have rarely been apart in this process, in the dual logocentric drive for what Lefebvre, paraphrasing Panofsky, calls the 'clarification of function through form' and the 'clarification of thought through language'.<sup>74</sup> Panofsky identified this as 'the logic of visualization'<sup>75</sup>, and it informs the entirety of social practice in the 20th century, centring knowledge around human discourse. Lefebvre contends that the logic of visualisation is an aberration normalized in society and:

finds justification in the social importance of the written word. Finally, by assimilation, or perhaps by simulation, all of social life becomes the mere decipherment of messages by the eyes, the mere reading of texts. Any non-optical impression - a tactile one, for example, or a



muscular (rhythmic) one - is no longer anything more than a symbolic form of, or a transitional step towards, the visual. An object felt, tested by the hands, serves merely as an 'analogon' for the object perceived by sight.<sup>76</sup>

Bergson approaches the domination of the visual field by language in his description of language as a 'human technology.' Marshall McLuhan summarises Bergson's theory:

language is a human technology that has impaired and diminished the values of the collective unconscious. It is the extension of man in speech that enables the intellect to detach itself from the vastly wider reality. Without language, Bergson suggests, human intelligence would have remained totally involved in the objects of its attention.<sup>77</sup>

Gardea's texts retrieve this 'vastly wider reality' that Bergson suggests has been diminished by the technology of language. While the visual presence of the letters and words of Gardea's texts is dependent on the symbolic workings of literacy - and 'literacy is a uniform processing of a culture by a visual sense extended in space and time by the alphabet'<sup>78</sup> - other visual senses are at work, that do not correspond to the alphabet of written language - sets of movement-images, collections of lines or figures of light.

In *El agua de las esferas*, Ugalde the waiter is bent double over the flame of a candle, his eyes lit by the glow. He is speaking to Brito Doval within this light event, but suddenly language and light become inseparable:

Después de habladas, las palabras del mesero, seguían vibrando en la luz. (p.30)

It is as if the light rays have taken on the energy of Ugalde's words, which become a stream of visible, vibrating particles. This intersection of words and luminescence overturns the separation and alignment of the senses, by which aural utterance is not seen and light rays not heard, and their cut-off points made into a single horizon, so that they cannot intersect.<sup>79</sup> With Ugalde's words, light and sound interfere with an energy that transgresses these visual and linguistic codes and Gardea expresses the relationship of



their forces in confrontation; the acoustic becomes visual and the visual becomes acoustic. The text forms through this interference, where language and light become inseparable, co-existing in a state of uneasy and disturbing beauty. This is the point where 'light-being' and 'language-being' intersect, where multiple perceptions are generated and the 'human technology' of language becomes an unstable and fragile medium.

Gardea's texts are generated by 'Los fuegos y las chispas...' - lines of light that surge and vibrate through the air.<sup>80</sup> They hum with sonic effect and this coming together of acoustic and light vibrations (the visual and the aural), is where words occur. In 'De alba sombría', the narrator comments of the girl Alba, 'Las palabras de la muchacha son como rayos del sol.' (p.83) In *El diablo en el ojo*, Orive 'Habló con el sol, lucimiento del arma.' (p.35) While the lines of light are carried by linguistic structures (words) they are not contained by them and seek to stretch the limits of human vernacular. This forces a break from the concept of language as purely a linguistic phenomenon, and the non-verbal component of words begins to shine through the language technology. A linguistic silence descends upon Placeres, but even this is luminous - 'El silencio brillaba...' <sup>81</sup>

Gardea's approach to the visual and his inversion of the human senses in light events, borders on what Duncan calls *Poetry Before Language*. Duncan wanted to 'describe Poetry as it was before words, or signs, before beauty, or eternity, or meaning, were.' It is a poetry, a dance, a song of bodily organs, of the sensual intelligence, that existed before the brain 'grew in upon its self...' <sup>82</sup> This is not to say that Gardea is reifying pre-linguistic man, rather that he draws on bodily cognition and sensual forces that existed long before intelligibility was centred on the twinning of language and visibility. Duncan takes up the line:

there were perceptions. Long before minding everything  
and finding fulfilment of self in everything. Long before  
mind or before any words. When all was dumb. There  
were dumb perceptions. A mountain came into view. The  
eye saw the mountain happen... <sup>83</sup>



as did the hand, ear, nostrils and nerve endings of the body. This kind of perception challenges Lacan's theories that privilege language, positing the insistence of the 'letter' in both the conscious and the unconscious.<sup>84</sup> Similarly it works against Wittgenstein's premise that, 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.'<sup>85</sup> Arguably 'my world' refers only to the world of the subjective self, it makes no reference to worlds beyond subjective readability. While Lacan is justified in contending that the human *subject* is constituted precisely by the entry into language, he is contradicting his own theory of the gaze, in which the *subject* 'slips away'. And if the *subject* does slip away, is it not into a realm uncoded by language?

Gardea takes the reader to this sensual, 'non-coded' realm. It is not a simplistic or pure realm, but a *state* that relies paradoxically on language to allow its communication between 'writer' and 'reader.' The texts simultaneously defy coded readability while offering access to non-coded realms. To reach this state, the 'reader' must 'read' synaesthetically - with their entire body.

### Semiotics

It could be argued that Gardea's language exists at the intersection of what Lefebvre calls verbal and non-verbal signs and symbols. According to Lefebvre, non-verbal signifying sets, such as music, painting, and architecture, are 'characterised by a spatiality which is in fact irreducible to the mental realm.' In this way, Lefebvre breaks down the legacy of Saussurean linguistics' attempt to become a 'science of sciences', in which everything - music, painting, architecture, landscape, space itself - is reduced to language and discourse. He continues:

To underestimate, ignore and diminish space amounts to the overestimation of texts, written matter, and writing systems, along with the readable and the visible, to the point of assigning to these a monopoly of intelligibility.<sup>86</sup>



Is it possible to talk of a semiotics of light in Gardea's work? In 'La guitarra', the mark left by the stolen guitar on the wall is caused by light interacting with the whitewashed wall. It is a non-verbal sign or signifier, a shape only visible at certain times of day and night. The men of the hospital trace its outline with their fingers; the wall feels like flesh to Miguel, the imprint of the guitar's body becoming the body of the tale, sensual and erotic. The luminous form hypnotizes the men in the hospital, its shape reminding them that they live in 'un pueblo sin mujeres'. (p.151)

But light cannot often be captured by signs and symbols in this way. The visual field tends to be dominated by light itself - its image and luminous movements - rather than a signifying marker left by it. This is not to say that these events are non-communicative, indeed they often outweigh in a communicative sense the sparse dialogue of the characters and literary conventions such as plot and narrative progression. This occurs because in Gardea's words, light rays are 'paquetitos de energía' - they carry 'información electromagnética', relayable to characters and readers. This concept comes from Quantum theory, developed by Planck at the turn of the century and made public in 1901. Against scientific tradition, Planck suggested that energy is not radiated in a fluid and continuous stream, but in finite steps, bundles of particles - *quanta*. This contrasts with Newton's Optics and all previous theories of light as fluid and continuous wave forms. For Gardea, the parcels of energy transferred in light are mobile blocks of 'information':

...la luz en cierta manera es información...información en la luz, en el tipo de la luz que esta moviéndose.<sup>87</sup>

This information is energy and it communicates time and space to the inhabitants of Placeres, shaping their daily life. But it is non-signifying and there is no relaying of a 'message'. A message implies the sharing of a 'code or codes in terms of which the message is intelligible to.'<sup>88</sup> It also requires a definite form or shape, a channel or channels, a topic and comment, participants - an addressor and addressee etc. <sup>89</sup> Light



does not operate in this way, but it can still be communicative. As Hymes states, 'The sound of footsteps or the setting of the sun may be taken as a source of information without being taken as a message...'<sup>90</sup>

Semiology claims that space is susceptible of a 'reading', that it embodies a discourse, a language. However, while the human impact on and production of space can be decoded and deciphered by a reader, this is not always the case for non-human elements, such as light and heat. The light rays of the sun cannot be 'read' as signs, for they connect with a sensory and visceral rhythm that Duncan claims exists from the very beginnings of life - 'with the first pulse of the blood in the egg...the changes of night and day must have been there.'<sup>91</sup> In the final chapter of this thesis, 'Death and Spiritual History', the limitations of semiotics - its reliance upon the 'readable' and the 'visible' - are exposed through an analysis of the spiritual forces in Placeres that cannot be contained within semiotic interpretation.



## Notes

1. Gardea, *Canciones para una sola cuerda*, p.49.
2. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*.
3. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p.350.
4. Good News Bible, Matthew 5.16, p.8.
5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.ix.
6. Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, p.60.
7. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p.xiii.
8. Deleuze, p.60.
9. Deleuze, p.61.
10. Bergson, p.3.
11. Octavio Paz, 'Vrindaban', in *Obra Poética (1935 - 1998)*, p.421.
12. Gardea, *La canción de las mulas muertas*, p.62.
13. Deleuze, p.60.
14. Gardea, *Los músicos y el fuego*, p.49.
15. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.132.
16. See the novel by Scott Bradfield, *The History of Luminous Motion*.
17. José Lezama Lima, *Esferaimagen*, p.27.
18. From the *Dictionary of the History of Science*, Ed. Bynum et al., p.235.
19. Gardea, 'La orilla del viento', p.44.
20. Enrique Florescano, *Memory, Myth and Time in Mexico: From the Aztecs to Independence*, p.10.
21. Gardea, *Los músicos y el fuego*, p.105.
22. In *El tornavoz*, Gardea suggests the need for armour plating to protect the body from the sun's rays, p.37.
23. Gardea, *El tornavoz*, p.123.
24. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.25.
25. See Sarmiento, *Facundo*.
26. Gardea, *El agua de las esferas*, p.84.
27. See Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, or *The Sower*.
28. Quoted by Robert Hughes in *The Shock of the New*.
29. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p.29.
30. Interview between Sergio Cordero and Gardea, 'Fundo espiritualmente a Delicias', in *La Jornada*, 9/1/88.
31. Interview between Hinchliffe and Gardea, September 1993. I asked if the light of Placeres was informed not by that of Delicias further south but by Juárez, to which he replied that while the light of Delicias is extreme, it is weak compared to that of Juárez. The two had developed his eyes and visual perspective, but Juárez gave his work its more intense luminous qualities.
32. Interview between Hinchliffe and Gardea.
33. Interview between Hinchliffe and Gardea.
34. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.34.
35. Gardea, 'Pálido como el polvo', p.131.
36. Gardea, *Los músicos y el fuego*, p.48.
37. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.29.
38. Charles Olson, *Human Universe*, p.70.
39. Arguably, it was Caravaggio in the early 17th century, who transformed the artistic language of vision, through his intensification of light values. In this period, there was an end to the soft, diffused light that had dominated previous artistic production, and a radical move towards more particular effects of light and shadow.
40. Helen Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*.
41. Jaques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.94.
42. Lacan, p.75.
43. Gardea, *La canción de las mulas muertas*.



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44. Gardea, *La canción de las mulas muertas*, p.71.
  45. Lacan points out that the Cartesian meditation on the function of the subject, and flat/geometral optics developed in conjunction in the same era.
  46. Deleuze, *Foucault*, p.81.
  47. Deleuze, *Foucault*, p.81.
  48. Robert Duncan, *The Opening of the Field*, p.7.
  49. Interview with Franciso Torres, in *Estanarrativa Mexicana*.
  50. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, p.262.
  51. Perhaps Faulkner begins to enact this desire himself, when Quentin describes the smell of water that he experienced in his home as a child, a smell that always entered his room at twilight. He comments, 'either it would rain more at twilight or there was something in the light itself...' (p.146)
  52. Don Juan, in *The Teachings of Don Juan: a Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, Carlos Castaneda, p.94.
  53. Quoted by Robert Hughes in his BBC TV series on US art, *American Visions*, 1997.
  54. Duncan, *Fictive Certainties*, p.69.
  55. Duncan, *Fictive Certainties*, p.70.
  56. Arnold Sommerfield, *OPTICS: Lectures in Theoretical Physics*, vol. IV.
  57. Horizon, *Orange Sherbet Kisses*, p.3.
  58. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p.96.
  59. Interview between Hinchliffe and Gardea.
  60. For example, the phrenology head, popular in the 1800s, suggested that every aspect of a person's psychology was localised in a different part of the brain.
  61. Shereshevski once said: 'I recognise a word not only by the images it evokes but by a whole complex of feelings that image arouses...its not a matter of vision or hearing, but some overall sense I get. Usually I experience a word's taste and weight...something oily slipping through my hand...or I'm aware of a slight tickling in my left hand caused by a mass of tiny, lightweight points.' Horizon, p.11.
  62. Horizon, p.4.
  63. Merleau-Ponty, p.229.
  64. Horizon, p.12.
  65. This process is assisted in the way Gardea simultaneously boosts the frequencies of light's interaction with matter to levels audible to the human ear, while amplifying its volume.
  66. Horizon, p.10.
  67. Castaneda, p.97.
  68. Castaneda, p.228.
  69. Castaneda, p.85.
  70. This is backed up with other references to electricity - the technology of fans, telephones, duke boxes etc.
  71. Due to its cost, electric light was beyond the means of many inhabitants of Chihuahua for many years after its introduction in the 1940s. To read Gardea's references to different light sources as clues to historical time setting is therefore a somewhat fraught exercise due to the uneven development and distribution of modern technologies. Gardea's interest often lies with those without access to social power, people who may have carried on living in Delicias without electricity long after its introduction in 1946.
  72. Gardea, *El tornavoz*, p.132.
  73. Lefebvre, p.96.
  74. Lefebvre, p.259.
  75. Lefebvre, p.286.
  76. Lefebvre, p.286.
  77. McLuhan, p.79.
  78. McLuhan, p.86
  79. If Gardea's words are charged with an electromagnetic energy that radiates the visual scene, and if he generates light-words in the amplified sense of a laser, the visible



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illumination of words in the episode of the waiter and the candle in *El agua de las esferas*, could be read as a hologram. A hologram is formed by the interference between two parts of a split laser beam. Perhaps the words of the waiter that hang and vibrate visibly in the light, are made into a visual image through a similar process of light ray interference.

80. Gardea, *Los músicos y el fuego*, p.29.

81. Gardea, *Los músicos y el fuego*, p.73.

82. Duncan, *Fictive Certainties*, p.62.

83. Duncan, *Fictive Certainties*, p. 62.

84. Lacan, *The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious*.

85. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*.

86. Lefebvre, p.62.

87. Interview between Hinchliffe and Gardea.

88. Hymes, D., *Toward Ethnographies of Communication: The Analysis of Communicative Events*, p.26.

89. Hymes, p.26.

90. Hymes, p.29.

91. Duncan, *Fictive Certainties*, p.77.



## FIVE

### Death and Spiritual History

Un tío mío fue secretario de Blake, una calle de Delicias  
lleva actualmente su nombre Gabriel Gardea. Si mi tío  
había fundado el Delicias material yo lo había fundado en  
lo espiritual, según el espíritu o según, con palabras tuyas,  
lo sobrenatural.

Jesús Gardea<sup>1</sup>

Cities are souls...

Henry Corbin<sup>2</sup>

In chapter one of this thesis, Chihuahuan soul beliefs were analysed in relation to Gardea's short story 'Vámonos ya'. This chapter will attempt to take this kind of analysis further - to assess the wider influence of regional folklore and spiritual beliefs on Gardea's work. The influence is by no means clear however, and the task has been complex and problematic. It has been further frustrated by the lack of publications available on the spiritual customs of the population of the *los Conchos* river and its tributaries - the location of Delicias - prior to the Spanish invasion in the 16th century. This absence of ethnohistorical data stems from the nomadic and semi-nomadic nature of the indigenous populations of the region. Unlike the Maya or Aztecs to the south, the *Tobosos*, *Conchos*, *Julimes*, *Salineros* and *Mamites* neither constructed edifices to sustain their cultures, nor recorded their history in any systematic way, beyond oral narrative forms. When these groups were exterminated, deported or converted to Christianity - through policies instigated by the colonial authorities at the start of the 18th century - their cultural traditions, including their spiritual beliefs were almost completely



eradicated. Modern historians' research into local pre-Hispanic culture is limited to a few chronicles written in the mid 17th century, and it remains unclear exactly what spiritual beliefs the 20th Century inhabitants of the region have received from their indigenous predecessors.<sup>3</sup>

From these few accounts however, linkages can be drawn between central Chihuahuan folklore and Gardea's narratives. In 'Arriba del agua', a man who lives on the plains expresses his fear of animal spirits that are thought to roam the *llano* in times of drought, an ancient and local belief:

Dicen que en el llano andan almas resucitadas de animales.  
Que llevan en orden sus huesos pisando firmes la tierra.  
Tantos años sin agua, dan para todo. Espantos y  
fantasmas. (p.105)

Jimena, who appears at the man's house out of the *llano* confirms his fears - 'De los mezquites salían fantasmas muertos de sed...Todos tenían cuernos. Ninguno, como los del venado que hay en el calendario de mi cuarto.' (p.109) She is a stranger to the man, a shadow figure projected upon him on a wave of heat and silence from the *llano* - 'la ola ha arrastrado una sombra hasta mi puerta. Me oscurece el aire.' (p.105) Her presence is an extension of the animal spirits, '-He caminado- se queja-. Como los animales que penan por el llano.' (p.106) The man remains unsure of her form beyond its erotic dimensions and questions her on the strange cries he heard prior to her arrival. It is unclear whether they came from her or from another being, or even the woman in another form. *Brujas* of the region were said to have powers of metamorphosis, using animals as vehicles of movement, action and deception.<sup>4</sup> The man is seduced by the woman, his desire a combined fascination with her physical beauty and her 'supernatural' passage from the *llano*.

To hinge Gardea's work solely upon such regional examples would be to deny the complexity of the psycho-spiritual space of Placeres. It is formed from an assemblage of various beliefs, ranging from folklore peculiar to the region, to a wider mythology of Chihuahua and the northern plains, to the *nahua* beliefs of central Mexico, and



Catholicism. This mixture is the result of Gardea's exposure to native beliefs and to popular Catholicism, both of which included magical thinking. An imagined mutation of Delicias, the town's spiritual history is further complicated by the flows of migration in the region since the 18th century. *Colonos* from central and southern Mexico took *nahua* beliefs to Delicias, along with numerous regional mythologies, syncretised and combined with Spanish Christianity. Delicias and then Placeres became the sites of multiple cultural inheritances, of fluid and hybrid beliefs. Furthermore, Gardea's own research into pre-Hispanic mythology and more importantly, his language and imagination, bring new and subtle spiritual forces into play that cannot be located in any particular cultural tradition. It would be reductive to assign the spiritual world of Placeres to anything but this plural history.

### *Remolinos and Tolváneras*

El aire, la luz esponjosos del verano, para el alma del  
muerto, como el agua para el pez.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout Mexico, there exists a popular and ancient belief that the souls of the dead travel with the wind; an alliance of death and moving air that enters Placeres - 'del lado de los muertos, un viento enorme, achiflonado.'<sup>6</sup> The 'natural' phenomena of the town - air, light, wind - becomes permeated by dead souls that use them as vehicles of movement and expression. A spiritual-geography of the town forms as the climate and atmosphere become inseparable from the actions and desires of the dead, reaching great intensity in the form of whirlwinds. Of all kinds of moving air, whirlwinds and dust winds - *los torbellinos, las tolváneras, los remolinos* - are the most revered in Mexican folklore for their qualities of supporting the supernatural through their twisting and revolving structures. In central Mexico, Tlaxcalans believed that whirlwinds -



*encamalachatl* in Nahuatl - were either 'spindles set a-whirling by dead souls' or 'the souls of the dead themselves'<sup>7</sup>. In northern Mexico, the *remolinos* that swept across the *llano* struck fear into the local inhabitants, as they were believed to be carriers of demons and the devil.<sup>8</sup> As Pérez Ribas describes in his eye witness account of Chihuahua (1645) - 'people who saw them would throw themselves on the ground, saying CACHINIPA, the name which they gave to the devil or to whom they feared and revered in that whirlwind...'<sup>9</sup> For the Tarahumara of the *Sierra Madre*, whirlwinds were the embodiment of 'evil sickening spirits'.<sup>10</sup>

Located in the heart of the central plains of northern Mexico, Delicias and Placeres are vulnerable to the *remolinos* and *tolvaneras* that are common to the region, particularly in spring time. At a bar in the short story 'El perro', from the collection *Las luces del mundo*, a dust 'devil' makes a twisting entrance:

El patio está abierto al llano, a las tolváneras. Turbio entonces; revuelto; un diablo.<sup>11</sup>

This is not merely a description of the force of the *llano* wind, but a spiritual invasion, the *tolvánera* allowing spirits to gain access to the town and its population. The physical destruction caused by the whirlwinds of dust on the landscape becomes an assault upon human souls - 'El torbellino que come nubes, flores, comerá, también, almas.'<sup>12</sup> The winds of the *llano* in *El diablo en el ojo* simultaneously 'consume' the town's spatiotemporal and spiritual dimensions:

El tiempo de Placeres, abundancia de remolinos. Días, horas, dormidos trompos. Tanto girar en la serenidad, una sola, lenta vuelta. Pero los remolinos engañan. Carcomen el mundo, desgastan la tela del alma. (p.43)

Invasions of wind spirits and dust devils into Placeres often occur after an act of violence has been committed in the town. This is consistent with a general belief in Mexico that the souls of the dead sometimes return 'in order to molest, frighten, or take vengeance on individuals...They appear in the form of phantoms, nebulous apparitions,



and repellent animals, and they play tricks and sometimes cause serious damage.<sup>13</sup> In *El diablo en el ojo*, the murder of Boscán triggers the anger and violence of the dead, who cry for a revenge killing. 'Los diablos de los rincones' invade Placeres:

Las noches de verano Placeres crece, se hincha de muertos. La invisible muchedumbre de julio...el libre tránsito de los cuerpos. (p.47)

The intensity of their desire builds to an electric storm:

En las tormentas, los muertos lavan sus huesos, los ordenan. Canutos, esferas de plata, lujos del otro mundo. (p.58)

They penetrate the car where Ontiveros and another man are plotting Boscán's revenge:

Alrededor suyo vibraban encantados muertos. Coros los muertos, dispuestos en niveles, como en una casa de muchos pisos. Ensartaban a Ontiveros...Un muerto es una ventana en la profundidad. Vidrio luminoso, durante la noche. (p.60/61)

It is not until the killer Borja has been shot, that the spirits disperse. They do not move off to another place or dimension, rather their intensity dissolves in the air and they shift into a different mode of being.

### *El tornavoz*

Voices, voices...

But listen  
to that soft

blowing...  
that endless report  
that grows out of silence.

It rustles toward you...

Rilke<sup>14</sup>



While Jesús Gardea wrote his most autobiographical work, *El sol que estás mirando*, he worked on another quite different novel, *El tornavoz*. Both texts deal with childhood and family relationships in Chihuahua in the mid-twentieth century; both are located in the oppressive climate and unique geophysical space of Placeres. But while *El sol que estás mirando* is a first person, chronological narrative of the events of Gardea's childhood with his shopkeeper parents, *El tornavoz* is narrated by a collective of voices that intertwine across different temporal zones. The tale spans three generations of the Paniagua family, focusing on the relationship between a dead uncle (Cándido) with his nephew (Isidro) and great-nephew (Jeremías). They communicate with each other in altered states of dream, trance and vision, crossing zones of space, time and death. Their voices and presence generate a sub-narrative dynamic, the force of which begins to dominate the text.

Isidro first experiences the voices when he is asleep, a state that begins to take over his life after the birth of his son, sometimes lasting several days. His wife fears that he is dying and asks a nurse '- ¿no estará yendo del mundo?' (p.20). In a sense he has already left Olivia's world, for as he sleeps, his dreams blow open doors to the dead, allowing them to enter his unconscious state. He eventually wakes up, but the long sleep has allowed him to be possessed by the voice of his dead uncle. This presence, having entered Isidro through his dreams, then begins to penetrate his conscious mind and daily life. In mid-conversation with his wife:

Isidro bostezó. Las aguas del sueño le habían ganado las piernas; subían por la cintura, llenas de murmullos. (p.27)

Isidro's body and consciousness are gradually being filled with the power of the dead uncle in an act of possession. Although he is awake, he has never regained his previous consciousness and it is as if he is living in different worlds simultaneously, becoming as Olivia observes a *sonámbulo*. He carries his uncle from the past and Placeres becomes a dream-scape of the dead, as he sleep-walks through it.



William Burroughs suggests that the dreamstate is not confined to sleep - 'the dream state goes on all the time, and...we can contact it in a waking state.'<sup>15</sup> Isidro begins to slip away from the daily structures and routines of his social and familial life and responsibilities, ignoring his wife and child, absorbed as he is by the resonance of his uncle Cándido's voice. Later in the narrative, Jeremías his son is also penetrated by the dead Cándido. He spends his days perched in the large poplar tree outside his house, listening to the sounds of Placeres and the *llano*, hypnotised by voices he cannot locate - 'Oye voces, gente que él no ve.' (p.81) It becomes impossible for him to separate the voices of the living and the dead that are carried on the winds of Placeres, the town flowing with a 'tráfico de muertos y vivos...' (p.107)

The inability to distinguish between the living and the dead gives Jeremías an ambiguous perceptory position. As Rilke suggests, this is unusual for humans, who tend to make rigid and reductive assumptions about life and death. In the first of the *Duino Elegies*, he states:

...the living are wrong  
                           in the sharp  
   distinction they make.  
 Angels, it seems,  
                           don't always know  
   if they're moving among  
 the living or the dead. (p.25)

In Placeres, the flow of voices on the wind - the 'tráfico de muertos y vivos...' - cannot be assigned to polarised concepts of life and death, and the 'sharp distinctions' of the 'living' cease to function. Caught in the flow, the inhabitants of the town pass into other dimensions of 'perception', like those of Rilke's angels.

A passage of this kind occurs at the end of James Joyce's 'The Dead'. Gabriel imagines the figure of Michael Furey, who killed himself years ago for the love of Gabriel's wife, Gretta. The figure waits for death in the rain - 'a young man standing under a dripping tree' - and as the image intensifies, Gabriel's world is taken over by the dead:



Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling. (p.255).

This altering of state and identity, this *becoming dead*, begins to fulfil Rilke's desire '...to keep life open towards death'<sup>16</sup>, a desire that resonates through Gardea's texts. But such a threshold state, where worlds dissolve and identities fade, is elusive and demanding; it takes away the security of 'a human future' - its prediction structures and conventions. As Rilke says, 'It's very hard to be dead...':

to live no more  
                    on the earth  
to abandon customs  
                    you've just begun  
                            to get used to  
not to give meaning  
                    to roses  
                            and other such  
promising things  
                    in terms of  
                            a human future  
to be held no more... (p.24)

But as he continues:

- you can be weaned  
from things of this world  
                    as gently as a child  
                            outgrows its mother's breast. (p.26)

Such a 'weaning' occurs in Placeres. Isidro and Jeremías are gradually removed 'from things of this world' and forced to 'abandon customs', through their communication with their dead uncle. Like Gabriel in 'The Dead', they are transformed through the interaction - their identities change and perceptions alter. The changes are almost imperceptible - 'gentle' as Rilke puts it - but the effects on the Paniagua family are devastating; it is torn apart by the dead Cándido's voice. Indeed, the subtlety of the



family's penetration by Cándido - through dreams and unlocated voices on the wind - is what makes the dead such a dangerous force. What they bring to Placeres is not controllable or anticipated in the way a 'human future' can be imagined, but an unpredictable world of jagged in-betweeness. As one inhabitant puts it - 'en el mundo nuestro, las cosas sucedían de otro modo.'<sup>17</sup>

A sub-textual resonance builds in *El tornavoz*, out of the presence of the dead and the intensity of non-cognitive perception among the 'living', that opposes and resists the more controlled space of *El sol que estás mirando*, with its linear narrative and emphasis on telling a chronological family history. When read together, *El tornavoz* becomes a counter voice to *El sol que estás mirando*. Or rather, the narrative voice of *El sol que estás mirando* becomes engulfed in the multivocal turbulence of *El tornavoz* - its disorientating interplay of 'live' and 'dead' voices perceived by the inhabitants of Placeres through different states of consciousness.

Although Cándido seems to be 'speaking' to his nephews, this is not oral communication/history in the traditional sense, as the organs of the physical senses are not being used. Cándido cannot transmit language through the sensory network of voice box, tongue and mouth sending acoustic vibrations to the receiver's ears, as he no longer has a human body. Similarly, when Jeremías hears voices of the dead, he does not perceive them through his sensual organs, but perhaps through what Corbin calls 'organs' of the imagination.<sup>18</sup> These 'organs' are apparently more sensitive in Placeres when a person is either asleep or disorientated in some way, such as through the dazzling intensity and heat of the sun. At such times, the person has no protection, no shield of consciousness. The voices are made even more dangerous because they are not embodied - they cannot be dealt with in the way the human ear responds to acoustic sound. They cannot for example, be shut off by covering or protecting the ear, as they are perceived through non-sensory 'receivers'. Nor can they be silenced by moving further away from the source, as the 'source' has no fixed spatial location and does not rely on acoustic vibrations through space to communicate its force. As a man who once

attempted suicide to escape unlocatable voices put it - 'The deep voices, loud and clear, pounded in as though all parts of me had become ears with my fingers and my legs and my head hearing the words.'<sup>19</sup> The subtle power of this kind of disturbance, and the inability of humans to control it, gives the voices a power to penetrate the human psyche and unconscious beyond the range of conventional language and sound.

Gardea suggests that when he returns to his hometown Delicias, he is taken over by memory and the flow of the 'tráfico de muertos y vivos...' At such times he is never alone - the dead of the town accompany him, their presence and voices pervasive and disturbing:

A los muertos de Delicias los siento como presencias; no que los vea. Simplemente sé que los se murieron allí, allí andan todavía.<sup>20</sup>

Soul beliefs of this kind run throughout the popular culture of Mexico, generated by the syncretic mixture of Catholic and pre-Colombian spirituality experienced since the 16th century's collision of Hispanic and indigenous Mexican cultures. While the most spectacular and thoroughly documented example of this hybrid belief is *El día de los muertos* - in which the Christian festival of *Todos Santos* is combined with native Mexican concepts of dead souls returning to visit their families - there is a wider belief, particularly in rural areas, that 'departed' spirits are always present and in constant communication with the 'living'.

Mexican soul beliefs suggest that the spirits are not spectres, but entities with corporeal dimensions, capable of tactile interaction.<sup>21</sup> The continuity of this belief has been maintained due to the inability of Catholic missionaries operating in the 17th and 18th centuries, to instil into indigenous cultures the alien concept of the soul as a non corporeal entity. Although the dead were referred to by the *nahua* as *descarnados*, they were simultaneously conceived as having corporeal forms. Thus at *Todos Santos*, the returning spirits can hear, smell and touch their relatives - they can consume the offerings



of food left in the cemeteries for them. In northern Mexico, the corporeal form of the dead came from an underlying belief that while death marked a passage from one state of existence to another - the crossing of a threshold - ultimately there is no dualistic structure of life and death: the worlds of the living and the dead are inseparable and interactive.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the dead remain in the same space-time dimension as the living, though in a different modality.

The dead in corporeal form enter Placeres in *El tornavoz*. After one of Cándido's regular visits to the local church Capuchinas, where he communicates with dead souls, the spirits follow him back to his home. When they arrive, their forms are coated with dust. They tell him, 'Este polvo de la ropa, polvo es, Cándido, del desierto.' (p.68) The spirits have a presence to which the physical world can cling in the form of dust. Travelling through the physical space of the *llano* that surrounds Placeres, the energy of their 'bodies' reacts with and collects matter. The coating of dust is neither metaphorical nor allegorical - the dead interact with the same physical dimensions as the living. While they may float above the ground between worlds, they still become covered by its particles of dust.

In his communication with the spirits, Cándido himself becomes transformed. He tells Isidro:

cuando entro Capuchinas yo soy otro: un Paniagua del  
cielo. (p.50)

Paniagua's body has become, as his name suggests, the '*breadandwater*' of the sky/heaven. In this way, just as the dead move in contact with matter, Paniagua's flesh enters the dimension of the dead - he is simultaneously of the flesh and the *descarnados*.

In his study of Mazdean spirituality, Henry Corbin expresses a similar experience of the inseparable quality of spirit and matter. For Corbin, they fold in upon each other, creating an interworld of 'many dimensions', where 'spirits are embodied, and bodies

spiritualized.' (p.84) He calls the inter-fold 'spiritual corporeity', the intermediary world between the intelligible and the sensory. Corbin describes the subtle distinction between spirit and body in the following way:

Spirits are being-light in the fluid state whereas bodies are being-light in the solidified state. The difference between the two is like the difference between water and snow. (p.99)

For Corbin, this area of flux between spiritual fluidity (air, water) and bodily solidity (land, snow) constitutes the ceaselessly shifting instant of 'spiritual flesh'. It is an uncontrollable, fluctuating moment of flow and hardening, between melting and crystallisation.

Such a moment occurs at the death of Jeremías's friend Colombino, when he falls from a poplar tree. As Colombino falls, there is no direct description of the falling matter of his body as it moves from tree to earth. Rather, Gardea narrates the event through other forces - the flows of sound and the voices of the dead carried by the wind, the light and air that surround the scene of death. The event is lit at sunset, in a beautiful red dustscape of death, and the voices travel illuminated in the light:

De la calle sube el humazo de un polvo, rojo también. Los ruidos del sábado, las voces de Placeres. (p.132)

One cry is struck by light rays, 'y cuando lo tocan los rayos del sol, se incendia y chisporrotea como una bengala.' (p.132) Sound and light interact; the voices and particles of light and matter simultaneously join together and burst apart in flames. The corporeal and tangible substance of Colombino's falling body - the 'snow' in Corbin's terms - does not crystallise at any moment. Instead, the body exists at an unstable point between crystallisation and melting; it is neither 'body' nor 'spirit'. It is not even clear at this time in the narrative that Colombino fell and died; there is no factual evidence, all that is left is that 'El rumor de los murmullos, apaciguado, golpea suavemente las puertas del zaguán.' (p.132)



The voices the nephews hear are not always undecipherable sounds. They become increasingly focused and pressing, eventually forming words. Jeremías tells Colombino of the voices he heard while sitting in the branches of the poplar tree outside his house:

- Colombino, en el árbol hablan...
- Es tan alto, que todas las voces de Placeres, en la calma, pasan por el árbol, Jeremías. Si hasta has oído ladrar los perros del llanito.
- No, eran voces que bajaban del aire.
- Me quieres asustar, Jeremías, te digo.
- No, Colombino. El que me asusté fui yo, pero nomás al principio; luego me puse triste.
- ¿Y qué es lo que dicen?
- Sólo una palabra, y siempre la misma, Colombino: Tornavoz.
- ¿Tornavoz? ¿Y qué es eso?
- No sé, Colombino. (p.125)

The friends attempt to discover the meaning of the word by looking it up in the books of the old man Crisóstomo, the only books in Placeres. They cannot find the word in the lexical sources and the semantic interpretation lags behind the actual becoming of the *tornavoz*. Written knowledge fails them as an interpretative source; it cannot inform them of the 'meaning' of the *tornavoz*.<sup>23</sup>

It is not until the end of the novel that Jeremías can answer Colombino's question. He returns to Placeres after twenty seven years of exile. Colombino's father, Vitelo asks Jeremías why he has come back and he answers with a name:

- Cándido Paniagua.
- ...-¿Vive aún Cándido Paniagua?
- ...-Vive. Vitelo.
- Jeremías escucha el rumor del agua en la penumbra de la calle.
- ...Y ¿qué es lo que quiere él ahora, Jeremías?
- Un tornavoz. Un tornavoz y que yo se lo haga.
- ¿Y eso qué es, Jeremías?
- Es como una campana, como un palomar.
- Jeremías...
- Techito abombado entre el cielo y la tierra. (p.145)

Cándido's desire for a *tornavoz* drives the spiritual events of the text. It supplies the dead with a voice that ceaselessly echoes and returns across different zones and thresholds of existence. The movement is relentless and violent, the conceptual boundaries between worlds of the 'living' and the 'dead', lost in the flow. But the word *tornavoz* is not simply a joining of the verb 'tomar' and 'voz', it refers to a structure placed above the pulpit in a church to carry the priest's voice towards the congregation. In use until the advent of electronic amplification, a *tornavoz* is a sounding board that resonates with the sound waves of the human voice, projecting them to a wider field than could usually be reached. Sound that would be lost above the priest's head due to the height of the church ceiling, could be focused and projected outwards. A *tornavoz* was usually constructed from a thin plate of metal or wood, in the shape as Jeremías suggests, of a dome or bell that would trap the voice, amplify it and project it at the audience. When Jeremías says that he has been instructed to make *himself* into a *tornavoz* for his uncle, it becomes clear that both he and his father have already existed as *tornavoces*. They arch themselves above the ghost of Cándido, absorbing and reflecting his desires upon Placeres. Here, the *tornavoz* transcends its material function of sound wave amplification, becoming a resonant source of communication between the voices and forms of the living and the dead, which are no longer distinct from each other.

The nephews are domed by another abstract structure in *El tornavoz* - the light, air and matter of Placeres, a 'visionary geography' that becomes an immense *tornavoz*. There are domes within domes to infinity in Placeres, sound transmuted across space-time boundaries. The 'structure' vibrates, amplifying and emitting a chorus of the voices of the dead of Delicias. Ontiveros is engulfed by them in *El diablo en el ojo* :

Alrededor suyo vibraban encantados muertos. Coros los muertos, dispuestos en niveles, como en una casa de muchos pisos. (p.60/61)

The turbulence within the domes reverberates and increases in volume through Gardea's other texts, Placeres not merely the site, but the generator of the sonorous and vibrant calls of the living dead:



Habían encontrado refugio en aquel coro y esa noche, en los filos del aullido, para levantarse de nuevo en la memoria de los vivos, estaban volviendo al mundo.<sup>24</sup>

### Historiography and Death

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And the enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

Walter Benjamin<sup>25</sup>

Historiography...recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge. A labour of death and a labour against death.

Michel de Certeau<sup>26</sup>

As the voices of the dead encircle Placeres and all sounds become riven and permeated with their murmuring and cries, an alternative history of Delicias begins to take abstract shape. It is perhaps easier at this stage to suggest what Gardea is *not* attempting in his narratives of death, with the help of Michel de Certeau's critique of traditional historiography. He is not organising *history* by 'recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge'. Neither is he on the historian's quest for 'meaning' through 'calling the dead who still haunt the present, and...offering them scriptural tombs'. For as de Certeau asserts, in historical works the 'departed find a haven in the text because they can neither speak nor do harm to anyone. These ghosts find access through writing on the condition that they remain forever silent.'<sup>27</sup> In *El tornavoz*, their voices resonate freely. As Vitelo says, '...son los muertos, que quieren vivir.' (p.108)

Death has not been forgotten in historiography; it continues to fascinate, but it has been appropriated by historians, ironically through the growth of multi-discipline approaches

to history. The multi-discipline approach - often fallaciously thought of as 'cultural studies'<sup>28</sup> - allows the historian to contain death within permitted fields of social knowledge, controlling its force. As de Certeau shows, this has a long tradition:

The immoral secret of death is deposited in the protected caverns reserved for it by psychoanalysis and religion. It resides in the vast metaphors of astrology, necromancy, or sorcery, languages that are tolerated so long as they constitute areas of obscurantism from which societies of progress 'distinguish' themselves.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, Gardea writes a non-metaphorical, non-religious history of Placeres, in a language that emerges from the streets, the *cotidiano* - the forgotten histories of Chihuahua, excluded from both the institution of the Church and the Mexican State's official discourse of modern progress.<sup>30</sup> But more than a regional history of the subaltern, more than a mental history of daily life, the spiritual dimensions of the texts undermine historiography's adherence to what Corbin calls 'the cult of fact', without resorting to either psychoanalysis or religious/occult rhetoric. Corbin defines the 'cult of fact' as the desire in traditional historiography to gain knowledge of the past through 'objects' of historical proof - material and factual evidence. The cult operates in tandem with the abstract hypothesis of chronological progression.<sup>31</sup> It carries residuals of Positivism and defines conventional research methods in historiography to this day, as defined by P.Tosh in *The Pursuit of History*:

The historian's first duty is to accumulate factual knowledge about the past - facts which are verified by applying critical method to the primary sources; those facts will in turn determine how the past should be explained or interpreted.<sup>32</sup>

The *tornavoz* is a counter 'structure' to the literary and rhetorical output of the political and academic institutions that uphold this tradition. While the latter exert the power of the living over the dead, the *tornavoz* desires the opposite, and the dead excluded from conventional historical language return in force.



In this, *El tornavoz* echoes the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's statement to the dead in *Los altos de Macchu Picchu* :

Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta...Hablad por  
mis palabras y mi sangre (p.46)

Yet, Gardea is never as explicit as Neruda - he does not claim to be an agent or spokesman for the dead and makes no unequivocal demands of them. In Placeres, it is the dead that make the demands of the living, Cándido overpowering and controlling his nephews, transforming them into *tornavoces*. Furthermore, Gardea does not assume the mantle of poetic responsibility to expose the suffering of the past - he does not embark on an epic quest of justice and truth on behalf of the wronged dead. Indeed, the only form of justice the dead of Placeres become involved in, is when they demand isolated acts of violent retribution, such as the murder of Borja in *El diablo en el ojo*. Although the dead are united at such times, they are not a homogeneous mass and seem to have little communal unity or identity. Cándido for example, possesses and manipulates the living for his own individual purpose - continuity of power. Thus, in contrast to *Los altos de Macchu Picchu*, the spirits cannot speak or act through a single agent or authorial voice, in the way Neruda desires. They cannot answer in unison his call to use his poetic power - 'Hablad por mis palabras y mi sangre.' (p.46) Even if they could, they would not become a source of historical truth and revelation for Gardea - their actions are deceptive and unclear, their words indecipherable murmurs carried on the wind.

Corbin suggests a radical alternative to the 'one dimensional historical consciousness' of western historical tradition.<sup>33</sup> He counters the 'cult of fact' with 'psycho-spiritual' events that cannot be confined to chronological and material development. Such events constitute Placeres as an historical site outside the realms of conventional history. For Corbin, the 'spiritual event' occurs through the stimulation of what he calls 'active imagination':

We must ask ourselves whether the invisible action of forces that have their purely physical expression in natural processes may not bring into play psychic energies that have been neglected or paralysed by our habits, and directly touch an Imagination... (p.11)

This imagination is not derived from any 'outer perception' and 'is possessed from the beginning', stimulated but not structured by the physical world. The 'active Imagination', is not arbitrary or allegorical, but an 'organ of knowledge', as real as the sense organs. This kind of 'knowledge' - spiritual perception and memory - and its effect on history, operates beyond the tools favoured by social science - rational abstraction and empirical materialization - and the 'concept' of history shifts. As Walter Benjamin states:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger...<sup>34</sup>

And if, as Benjamin continues, the 'past can be seized only as an image', the *imaginary* becomes the most vital 'organ' of historical investigation. As an inhabitant of Placeres states: 'Imaginé la acción de los del otro mundo' (p.94), and spiritual histories flash up instantaneously. This is not 'History' as 'homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit* ]'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Benjamin simultaneously breaks Enlightenment concepts of time as linear progression and historicism's desire to posit the past in static and isolated blocks of time (eras). History becomes a mobile site of instant danger for the present - the inhabitants of Placeres are drawn out of their socio-cultural worlds by the spontaneous voices and actions of the dead. The 'cult of fact' in historiographical method collapses at this point, and imagination - shot through with moments of danger - begins to shape historical perception.



### Psycho-Geography: Placeres as Interworld

Strange  
     to see things  
         that seemed to  
 belong together  
     floating in every direction...

Rilke<sup>36</sup>

Jeremías states that the *tornavoz* is suspended 'entre el cielo y la tierra', and at this point between sky and earth, at a site unlocatable by geophysics, Placeres exists. It is not a schizoid world, it is not constituted by division or split, rather it is an intermediary of worlds, the joining of worlds conventionally perceived to be separate. By inhabiting this space, Placeres forces an entry between a multitude of accepted dualisms: matter and space; body and spirit; the sensory and the intelligent; the conscious and the unconscious; the corporeal and the incorporeal; the tactile and the imagined. In doing so, it shatters traditional concepts of history that create a past world built upon cognitive and intellectual systems. Placeres, in contrast resides *between* worlds and times, in an imagined psycho-geographic space.

In *El agua de las esferas*, Bastidas is haunted by dead tenants in his house, and he slips onto a crack between worlds:

Bastidas estaba en el rayo como en una grieta,  
 comunicación de este mundo con el otro. (p.54)

The crack of light is a fault line and the boundary becomes a passage between worlds and interworlds.

This sense of movement through interzones is common to the plains regions of northern Mexico, inherited from pre-Hispanic cultures. In Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, the shaman Don Juan - who lived and practised in Sonora and Chihuahua - states:

The particular thing to learn is how to get to the crack between the worlds and how to enter the other world. There is a crack between the two worlds, the world of the diablos and the world of the living men. There is a place where the two worlds overlap. The crack is there. It opens and closes like a door in the wind. (p.182)

When the crack opens the man has to slide through it. It is hard to see on the other side of the boundary. It is windy like a sandstorm. The wind whirls around. (p.183)

The 'geography' opens onto a plateau, a floating *llano*, and the landscape of Chihuahua and Sonora transmutes to Don Juan's vision:

It is a plane above the ground. It is possible to recognise it by the wind, which there becomes even more violent, whipping roaring all around. On top of that plateau is the entrance to that other world. And there stands a skin that separates the two worlds; dead men go through it without a noise, but we have to break it with an outcry... (p.183)

The skin is a doorway of perception, constantly broken in Placeres by the psycho-spiritual passages of the inhabitants. At times the crossings are violent and noisy - for example Ontiveros in the electric storm in *El diablo en el ojo* (p.58-61). At others, the 'structure' of the skin silently collapses under the pressure of repeated crossings, and Placeres moves to its inter-zonal position. It becomes the 'skin' itself, an intermediate world illuminated by the intensity of the sun, hovering in the sky:

En Placeres el sol inventaba la altura del mundo. Las cosas de Placeres tenían sus dobles, torres cristalinas navegando en el aire.<sup>37</sup>

Spiritual corporeity as 'snow' has crystallized in the air and light. Words vibrate against the 'structures' that form and collapse - 'Las palabras de Ontiveros resonaban como pedacitos de hielo contra un cristal.' (p.123) Here, the language of the text interacts with an interworld that cuts between spirit and matter, between psycho and geophysical



realities. A visionary Placeres simultaneously cristallizes in the light of the sun and melts in its heat; bodies defying gravitational fields, the crystal forms trembling at the interstice.

### Gardea and Juan Rulfo: Placeres and Comala

Much has been made of Gardea's debt to Juan Rulfo, particularly in the creation of Placeres as an extended terrain of Comala, displaced from Jalisco to Chihuahua.<sup>38</sup> Critics place Placeres in the wake of Comala because in Placeres, 'Gardea, como Rulfo antes, ha borrado las fronteras entre este mundo y el otro.'<sup>39</sup> The problem with such comparisons is that Gardea's location of Placeres and its inhabitants between sky and earth, differs radically from the spiritual geography of Rulfo's Comala. Comala fluctuates between a place of Catholic purgatory - of souls condemned to wander the earth - and *Mitla* the underworld of pre-Hispanic belief systems.<sup>40</sup> Placeres, in stark contrast floats:

a medio camino del cielo y la tierra, prendido a la oscura  
piel de las almas.<sup>41</sup>

While the inhabitants of Comala are dead souls buried in graves or walking the earth's surface, the dead of Placeres inhabit the gaps left by Christian philosophy between the earth (purgatory) and its underworld (hell) and the sky (heaven). It is here that their 'skin' hangs - 'spiritual flesh' that traps and absorbs the 'living' population of the town. This interworld is not a qualitative space in terms of heaven, hell or purgatory; it is not reached through a punishment and reward system in which a divine judge directs the soul to its allotted point in the afterlife. Indeed, Placeres is closer than Comala to the pre-Hispanic cultures that claimed that it was the way a person died, rather than their moral behaviour in life, that determined their destination in the afterworld. To suggest then, as

Ignacio Trefo Fuentes does, that Placeres is 'una suerte de Comala rediviva', is a limited and misleading comparison.<sup>42</sup>

### Shamanism, Ritual and Knowledge

Carlos Monsivaís suggests that the spiritual is 'aquello que las palabras no pueden expresar; aquello que sólo existe a partir de las palabras.'<sup>43</sup> How then to approach that which eludes language, that which slips away from linguistic patterns and controls? Gardea uses a vernacular language - non-jargonised, non-religious, non-psychiatric - to create the force of 'psycho-spiritual' actions. From inside 'ordinary' language, spiritual dynamics emerge that are not disciplined or commanded by religious or academic dogmas. These dynamics are traditionally either excluded or taken over and controlled, by the ritual and conceptual language of religious and occult institutions. In Placeres, they flow from the inhabitants' lives, through 'organs' of perception and imagination that move beyond physical sensation and mental interpretation, to other fields of intensity.

To address this, requires an escape from the conventional paradigms and analytical tools of the social sciences; if the spiritual event becomes an 'object of study', its dynamics are lost amidst interpretative methods and languages inadequate to its dimensions. The spiritual events of Placeres are resistant to this kind of analysis - they are passages through altered states, rather than static blocks of factual and material history. For the Yaqui teacher Don Juan, such states of 'non-ordinary' reality are the only forms of 'pragmatic learning' and the only means of acquiring power.<sup>44</sup> To attain them he used hallucinogenic plants such as *peyote* and when they were reached, 'other forms of knowledge' became redundant. As Carl Einstein puts it: 'Hallucinatory forces create a breach in the order of mechanistic processes...'<sup>45</sup> Instead of using drugs to make the breach, Gardea breaks the 'skin' between worlds, and crosses perceptory



thresholds in Placeres through intensities of heat, light and dust, and the destabilizing force of whirlwinds and rapid shifts of speed and sound. In *El diablo en el ojo*, 'el calor atrofiaba las mentes' (p.29); 'los remolinos engañan' (p.43); 'En Placeres el sol inventaba la altura del mundo'. (p.65) In this way, like a *brujo* or *diablero* shaman of northern Mexico, Gardea gives 'instructions' to the mind, senses and imagination, transforming interpretative faculties and psycho-spiritual states. Intermediary worlds open up, bringing perceptory disequilibrium and 'hallucinatory' responses that border on visionary delirium:

En la calle, miré para el aire, recorrí el cielo, recapacité.  
En los hundimientos de uno mismo, uno es que no es.<sup>46</sup>

Yet while Gardea uses writing as shamanistic action, what distinguishes him from a Mexican *brujo*, is that the transformations he causes, occur *without* the social sanctions of ritual ceremony or protocol.

This is a radical departure from the teaching of the Yaqui shaman Don Juan, who sets operational goals for his pupil Castaneda, that can only be reached through adhering to specific ritual acts. These include traditional methods of acquiring, preparing and consuming *peyote*, in which the location, time and tools to be used are of vital importance, and the ways in which the pupil should communicate with spirit gods such as *Mescalito*, while under the influence of the drug. While there are degrees of flexibility built in to this, and while individuals responses can never be predicted, there remains a ritual process around the acts that keeps them directly connected to a path of learning and knowledge. Such a programme of ritual education and ceremonially code is absent from Gardea's texts.

Furthermore, while the spiritual events of Placeres are passages through altered states, they do not correspond to the cultural process of *rites of passage*, defined by the anthropologist Van Gennep as, 'rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position...'<sup>47</sup> Van Gennep goes on to suggest that *rites of passage* have three phases - separation, margin (*limen* - signifying threshold) and aggregation. In the first

phase (separation), the individual is detached from a set of cultural conditions - a state. In the second (margin), the passenger 'passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.'<sup>48</sup> In the third phase, (aggregation) the individual is reincorporated into established social structures and the passage is consummated. While the first two phases of this passage occur in the spiritual events of Placeres, the third is virtually non-existent. In *El tornavoz*, once the nephews enter states of possession by the dead, they never regain social integration. They remain in the liminal state, floating 'between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial.'<sup>49</sup> Isidro never seems to regain consciousness and social stability after his long sleep and penetration by his dead uncle. Indeed, so many of the inhabitants of Placeres exist in this ambiguous realm, that the conditions for Van Gennep's rites of passage - social structure and cultural conventions - are barely maintained. The threshold state overpowers these conditions, preventing the very concept of ritual stages that can be clearly recognised and marked.

In the communication with the dead in Placeres, Gardea does not act as a mystical guide - he does not supply a magico-religious path or journey to the world of the dead with ritual stages and challenges on the way. This contrasts with the mythic traditions of western culture. When Odysseus is forced to travel to Hades, in Homer's *The Odyssey*, the goddess Circe gives clear instructions in the ritual acts that must be performed to both summon up the dead and to protect Odysseus from the gods of the underworld. Odysseus follows them meticulously, as they alone will grant him safe passage:

I drew my sharp sword from my side and dug a trench as long and as wide as a man's forearm. There I poured libations to all the dead, first with a mixture of honey and milk, then with sweet wine, and last of all with water...and then began my prayers to the insubstantial presences of the dead...When I had finished my prayers...I took the sheep and cut their throats over the trench so that the dark blood poured in. And now the souls of the dead came swarming up from Erebus...  
(p.160)



The fulfilment of these ritual stages are guarantees of safety even at the gates of Hades. But there are no such protocols in Gardea's narratives; no sanctifying acts or sacrificial gestures to protect the inhabitants of Placeres in their contact with the dead. This absence occurs in spite of Mexico's long history of sacrifice, including Catholic notions of sacrifice, Aztec mass sacrificial ceremonies, and the killing of new-born infants to drive away sickness among the indigenous tribes of the northern plains.<sup>50</sup> Without these or other sacrificial rites in Placeres, there are no cultural defence mechanisms against the dead - no surrogate victims or scapegoats - no religious sanctions against their power. Thus when spiritual events occur, the participants face death without the shield of ritual symbols and acts that comprise Odysseus's cultural armour. Unprotected and without social sanctions, they enter a field of extreme danger - the skin between worlds - ritually naked, a state that gives them no control over the dead souls, who are free to enter and possess them. The entire town is left vulnerable, the spirits penetrating in violent and uncontrollable rushes of wind - *torbellinos* and *tolvaneras* - the force of which leaves nothing standing as it was. All becomes altered and transformed, not to some utopic state or vision, but to an unmappable threshold of death - 'El torbellino que come nubes, flores, comerá, también, almas.'<sup>51</sup>

The one attempt at a ritual form of communication with the dead in *El tornavoz* is a complete failure. Isidro and a group of men try to summon spirits through regular seance meetings, but the only voices they hear come from outside the occultist ring, from the streets - 'Afuera sonaban voces aisladas en el sol intenso de...la tarde.' (p.24) The seance fails because ritualistic methods are ineffectual in Placeres; spirit voices are heard at instantaneous and indistinguishable 'moments of danger' - in Isidro's dreams and in the blowing of the wind on the streets - rather than at the seance built on occult convention and ceremonial code.<sup>52</sup> The dead do not respond to such culturally structured attempts at communication. Thus, Gardea moves directly against Octavio Paz's universalising claim that Mexicans are 'un pueblo ritual. Y esta tendencia beneficia a nuestra imaginación tanto como a nuestra sensibilidad...'<sup>53</sup> In Placeres, ritual

ceremony is either non-existent or ineffectual, and for Gardea this is where imagination occurs, when ritual is left behind.



## Notes

1. Gardea, in a personal letter, 21/4/94.
2. Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shí'ite Iran*.
3. See Griffen, *Culture Change and Shifting Populations in Central North Mexico*, in which the author quotes from the chronicles of Pérez Ribas - *Historia de los triumphos de nuestra santa fee entre gentes las mas bárbaras y fieras del Nuevo Orbe*. (1645) Published in 1944 by A. de Paredes, Madrid.
4. See Griffen.
5. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.123.
6. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.94.
7. Nutini, *Todos Santos in Rural Tlaxcala*, p.117.
8. The linkage of wind to evil spirits is not peculiar to Mexico. In European folklore, the Devil is said to assume the form of a 'cold, north wind.' (See John Ingham, *Mary, Michael and Lucifer: Folk Catholicism in Central Mexico*, p.170) Indeed, the *remolino* devils show signs of a combination of European and pre-Hispanic beliefs.
9. Pérez Ribas, *Historia de los triumphos de nuestra santa fe entre gentes las mas bárbaras y fieras del Nuevo Orbe*, (1645) Quoted by Griffen, p.132.
10. Elsie Clews Parsons, *Mitla : Town of the souls*, p.215.
11. Gardea, 'El perro', p.61.
12. Gardea, *Los músicos y el fuego*, p.65.
13. Nutini, p.312.
14. Rainer María Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, p.23.
15. William Burroughs, *The Adding Machine: Collected Essays*, p.95.
16. Letter from Rilke to Nanny von Escher, December 1923, quoted by David Young in the introduction to *Duino Elegies*.
17. *El agua de las esferas*, p.43
18. Corbin, p.88.
19. From the account of an 'escaped mental patient', who had attempted to drown himself after hearing voices... William Burroughs, *The Adding Machine: Collected Essays*.
20. Personal letter.
21. See Nutini, p.311.
22. The Aztecs in contrast, built binary structures around life and death, with clearer distinctions between them.
23. The failure of these sources - the only books Gardea mentions to exist in Placeres - suggests Gardea's own scepticism towards written forms of academic knowledge. In interview he stated, 'tengo alergia a la información. No me interesa gran cosa estar informado.' As a means to help the inhabitants of Placeres in their daily lives, book knowledge is redundant; the implications for historiography are clear.
24. Gardea, *Los músicos y el fuego*, p.98.
25. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, p.255.
26. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*.
27. De Certeau, p.2.
28. See Eric Mottram's response to the Cultural Studies Questionnaire in *Travesia*, volume 2, no.1.
29. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p.194.
30. In her struggle to relate women's history against the dominant discourse of patriarchal society in the early 20th century, Virginia Woolf attempted: 'to catch those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves, no more palpably than the shadows of moths on the ceiling, unlit by the capricious and coloured light of the other sex.' (*A Room of One's Own*, p.81) The urgency and subtlety of Woolf's desire to write the unwritten histories of society illuminates Gardea's task, even though Woolf's and Gardea's targets for critique and revelation are different. Rather than telling a history untold by the male sex, Gardea seeks to catch the unrecorded 'language'

of psycho-spiritual events 'unlit' by the 'enlightened' knowledge of Historiography and the social sciences. In *El tornavoz* and *El diablo en el ojo*, Placeres begins to secrete its own light.

31. Raymond Williams summarises this tradition since the 18th Century - 'the Enlightenment sense of the progress and development of civilisation...the idealist sense, as in Hegel, of world-historical process; and on the political sense, primarily associated with the French Revolution and later with the socialist movement and especially with Marxism, of historical forces - products of the past which are active in the present and which will shape the future in knowable ways.' (*Keywords*, p.147) While the concept of history as 'progress' has come under increasing criticism from all disciplines, that of 'process' remains entrenched in the philosophy of modern western historical consciousness.

32. John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p.132.

33. Corbin, p.53. While this chapter leans heavily on the writings of Corbin and his interpretations of Iranian spirituality in analysing Gardea's work, it should be noted that there are fundamental cultural differences. Aside from the obvious spatiotemporal contrasts, Mazdean spirituality has a *defined* vision of the world and interworlds that constitute spiritual corporeity. There is vertical movement toward the 'divine', an ascendancy that can begin to imply a systematic hierarchy that is completely absent from Gardea's vision. Similarly, light in Mazdean faith is a symbolic and immaterial suggestion of divinity and must be striven for against the currents of darkness; sunlight is the source of vision and spiritual fluidity. In Placeres, in contrast, there is no binary and qualitative philosophy on 'light and dark'. Light has physical substance that attacks and destroys the psyche as much as enhancing it. For Gardea, there is no ascendant movement in light, his characters are simultaneously oppressed by and freed of physical constraints by the Chihuahuan sun. (See previous chapter, 'Light and Perception: Histories of Luminous Motion'.)

34. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p.255.

35. As Hannah Arendt points out, 'Benjamin says "*Jetztzeit*" and indicates by the quotation marks that he does not simply mean an equivalent to *Gegenwart*, that is, present. He clearly is thinking of the mystical nunc stans.' Benjamin, p.261.

36. Rilke, p.25.

37. Gardea, *El diablo en el ojo*, p.65.

38. There are many limitations to such comparisons. On the one hand they fail to highlight the contrasting physical geography of the *llanos* of Jalisco and Chihuahua, and on the other they ignore the contrasting historical experiences of the people of Jalisco in the 1920s/30s - the Revolution and the Cristero War - and those of Delicias in the 1940s/50s - the State sponsored programmes of irrigation that spawned the town. I asked Gardea how he felt about comparisons to Juan Rulfo. He replied that he would rather be compared to Juan Rulfo than to Carlos Fuentes.

39. Jirina Poncarova Valenzuela, doctoral thesis, *La Muerte y la soledad en los cuentos de Jesús Gardea*, p.160.

40. José Revueltas' *El luto humano* - another text Gardea's work is likened to in this respect - occupies a similar space. However, in contrast to the subtleties of Rulfo's Comala and Placeres, the psycho-geography of *El luto humano* is described through overbearing biblical imagery, Marxist dogma and 'Primitivism' - epic symbolism from pre-columbian Mexican history.

41. Gardea, *El tornavoz*, p.95.

42. Ignacio Trefo Fuentes, 'Jesús Gardea: una suerte de Comala rediviva'.

43. Carlos Monsiváis, 'Sí, tampoco los muertos retoñan, desgraciadamete', in *Juan Rulfo: Toda la obra*, ed. Claude Fell. p.840.

44. Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, p.21.

45. Carl Einstein, *André Masson, étude ethnologique*. (1929) Quoted by James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, p.130.

46. Gardea, *La canción de las mulas muertas*, p.77.



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47. Quoted by Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, p.94.
  48. Turner, p.94.
  49. Turner, p.95.
  50. Griffen, p.127.
  51. Gardea, *Los músicos y el fuego*, p.65.
  52. The conducting of seances was an important ingredient of a wider spiritism movement that was popular in the 19th century.
  53. Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, p.42.

## Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to explore the worlds of Gardea's texts without reducing them to any of the intellectual systems or analytical procedures that are popular in contemporary academic institutions. In this sense, the research lays no claim to institutional legitimacy. At the same time however, it can neither escape the limitations of its structure as a doctoral thesis, nor its relationship with the academic institutions to which it has been submitted. These restrictions, along with problems in the research itself, have contributed to a sense in this closing chapter that areas of Gardea's texts continue to elude analytical interpretation. To put it another way, there remain qualities of Placeres that cannot be captured through recognised methods of literary analysis.

In Gardea's short story 'Hombre solo', from the collection *Los viernes de Lautaro*, the old man Zamudio hears voices at night:

Zamudio duerme apenas. Emplea las noches en volver a las voces y en tratar de entenderlas. Se acuesta boca arriba y espera. Las voces se anuncian como se anuncia la lluvia. A Zamudio se le agita entonces una fronda íntima y se le llena el pecho de rumores.

Esto no dura. Las voces quieren ser descifradas. Zamudio va a sufrir en el afán. Será acosado por ellas: se le pondrá sitio de lumbre a la cabeza. Viniendo el alba, medio ardido, humeante, se arrepentirá -como siempre- de haberse tendido a esperar. (p.20)

Perhaps, at the conclusion of this thesis, the work has become an echo of Zamudio's frustrations: the voices of Gardea's texts are like the murmurs that the old man hears, they are elusive and unclear - they cannot be 'understood'. Just as Zamudio laments his sleepless night, doubts linger in this closing chapter - attempts to 'decipher' are futile, they bring only suffering and a head 'besieged by fire'. But the voices are persistent -



'Será acosado por ellas...' - and cannot be ignored. They return each night with renewed strength and will not be silenced or subdued.

Perhaps there should be no attempt to interpret the voices of Gardea's texts through linguistic means alone. Perhaps they should be 'heard' through quite different mediums, in a much wider field of perception that cannot be assimilated into structures of language. For rather than using recognized speech patterns, the voices penetrate characters and readers through other less controlled and more dangerous routes. They announce themselves to Zamudio, like the coming of rain - 'A Zamudio se le agita entonces una fronda íntima y se le llena el pecho de rumores.' This communicative interaction is subtle and disturbing: it is non-conceptual and cannot be explained through Saussurean linguistic theories, as it displays no 'system of signs'. In other words, there is no clear, repeatable relationship between a concept (the *signified*) and an acoustic noise which stands for the concept (the *signifier*). Related to this, there is no structured interaction between a *speaker* and *interlocutor*. The conditions for this kind of relationship do not exist here - it is neither clear 'who' is talking to Zamudio, nor 'how' the old man hears them, and there is no functional transmission and reception of messages or meanings. Similarly, the voices touch Zamudio in ways that do not fit Habermas's theory of *communicative competence*. This theory claims that all communication is based upon a 'fundamental system of rules' and 'universal validity claims' - *comprehensibility, correctness, truth* and *sincerity* - which Habermas developed from Chomsky's rules of grammar.<sup>1</sup> The voices cannot be assimilated into such theories as they neither follow any prescribed linguistic rules (Zamudio cannot 'decipher' them), nor adhere to any of the 'qualities' of 'universal validity'.

In the twentieth century, linguistic rules and conditions have increasingly been used to colonise both conscious and unconscious experiences. On the one hand, it has been widely accepted since Wittgenstein, that 'consciousness is linguistically organised and is only accessible in and through language'.<sup>2</sup> On the other, Lacan has suggested that the human unconscious is also structured like language.<sup>3</sup> For Zamudio however, these theories have little relevance. His communication with the voices occurs only when he is

at his most vulnerable - when he is asleep, in a liminal state *between* conscious and unconscious worlds, an experience similar to Isidro Paniagua's in *El tornavoz*, discussed in chapter five. In this 'in-between' state, Zamudio's interaction with the voices becomes inaccessible via conventional linguistic hypotheses. Rather, as Zamudio sleeps and his intellectual faculties of interpretation diminish, the force of the voices - their rhythmic repetition, penetrative desire and urgency to be heard - generate and transmit extreme sensual and emotional intensities. Zamudio is filled with their resonance, becoming an unstable 'sitio de lumbre...': without understanding a single word they utter, he is transformed by their power.

Arguably, readers of Gardea's texts are altered in a similar way. Like Zamudio, a reader can be penetrated by the emotional and poetic intensities of the voices, becoming vulnerable and exposed to their force. In the process, preconceived and familiar modes of literary interpretation are overcome by less intellectually controlled - unconscious - interactions with the text. In other words, while the printed symbols of linguistic patterns draw the reader into a recognised field of literary narration, the security of this position is constantly threatened by forces that are not easily contained within language. These forces have emerged at vital moments throughout this thesis, disrupting any desire to subordinate research to a mere 'decipherment' of Gardea's texts. Indeed, they challenge many widely accepted analytical procedures and require more subtle and diverse approaches that may have neither a recognised name, nor origin in any specific academic discipline. For example, chapter three discussed non-verbal and 'presignifying' forms of communication in Placeres - non-articulate sounds, the cries of the dead - that defy the logic of conventional forms of language analysis and their dependency upon *signifier* - *signified* relationships. Linked to this, chapter five explored the voices of dead souls in *El tornavoz*, that transform Placeres into an inter-world that hovers between the 'living' and the 'dead'. In this liminal zone, bodies and spirits are inseparable, becoming as Corbin puts it 'spiritual flesh'. Utterances cannot be assigned even to 'dead' or 'living' sources here, let alone individual speakers with clear communicative intentions.



In chapter four, the forces emerged through exploring intensities of light - or light events - in Placeres, that are capable of disrupting 'the logic of visualization'. The modernist trio of 'readability - visibility - intelligibility' (Lefebvre) falters and breaks down in the process.<sup>4</sup> Here, light, like the murmurs in 'Hombre solo', cannot be reduced to a 'reading', or even to the fundamentals of semiotic theory, as its power is non-symbolic and non-signifying.

By removing traditionally accepted interpretative frameworks in this way, at certain critical moments of this thesis the research can begin to move closer to the voices of Placeres, to interact with them more as the inhabitants do. The voices are reached, not through attempting to 'understand' them, but through extending the possibilities of human perception and experience - by becoming like the old man in 'Hombre solo', an intense 'sitio de lumbre...'. If this can occur, their force and longing to be heard will perhaps have been realised.

The intensity of this force is complicated, however, when the voices and murmurs of Placeres are given socio-cultural, political and historical contexts. This occurs throughout the thesis and allows the voices to be 'heard' through what appear to be more tangible media. For example, chapter one offered an historical and political framework for the voices - how the construction of Delicias as a component of the PRI government's national modernization project generated the fictional world of Placeres: its social, economic and cultural landscape. More specifically, in the analysis of the short story 'Vámonos ya', the voices of returning dead souls were contextualised with the modern technology of an automobile. The interaction that occurs here between spiritual forces and modern products suggests Gardea's desire to locate the spirit voices socially and culturally, rather than simply isolating them in the realms of the 'intangible'.

In chapter two, the voices were given the context of the spatial logic behind the planning of Delicias that is transmuted to Placeres. This logic operated not only upon the physical structures of the town, but also attempted to develop its imaginary and mythical dimensions - the myth of conquering the *llano* and instituting a productive new polis,

ordered along spatiotemporal lines that reflected the political desires of central government. Here, the 'imaginary' voices of Gardea's texts were brought into relationship with the imaginary society that Ing. Blake and his accomplices, and institutions such as the Rotary Club (whose literature was published by the State) attempted to build. Not surprisingly, as they interact in Placeres the imaginary geopolitical logic behind Delicias in the form of its monuments to secular time, civil authority and urban economic efficiency, is perforated by utterances that cannot be reduced to their geometric structures. In chapter five, the voices were linked to popular spiritual beliefs of Chihuahua, folkloric traditions that guide the local population's contact with the actions and utterances of dead souls. In this way, a limited anthropological context is brought into play, giving some suggestions as to *who* hears the voices in Placeres and *how*, and *why* their power and influence upon the town's inhabitants is so great.

There are clearly a number of areas of research related to the above that need expansion beyond the limits of this thesis. Firstly, the exploration of language in chapter three would benefit from a closer analysis of the regional forms of language that shape Gardea's texts. The importance of this kind of research is alluded to by William Carlos Williams when he says of Edgar Allen Poe - 'The language of his essays is a remarkable HISTORY of the locality he springs from...'<sup>5</sup> In Gardea's work, the language of his characters - their turns of phrase, vocabulary, syntax and slang - is often specific to central north Mexico, shaped by the region's culture and history. The possibilities that an investigation into this relationship between language and history could open are rich and diverse. For example, the analysis in chapter three of the relationship between language and power could be expanded to the relationship between speaking and the history of words - the changes in their meanings and uses in a specific locality over hundreds of years. This semantic investigation could then be linked to the social lives of the inhabitants of Placeres and how their utterances are expressions of historical experience. An example of this process in Gardea's work is the Americanised Spanish used by his characters, often in connection with modern technological products. The proximity of Delicias and Juárez to the US border are clearly instrumental in this



linguistic relationship, but there are numerous other factors that have influenced the specific kinds of Spanish language in use in Chihuahua. Indeed, to link these ways of speaking to the historical development of Chihuahuan society would be a complex and time-consuming task, more aptly pursued by a researcher with an intimate knowledge of regional forms of Spanish.

Related to this, Gardea's work would benefit from further research into the history of Chihuahua. This could bring a variety of new contextual materials in to play and offer different insights into the relationship between the writer and his cultural environment - between literature and history. For example, the analysis in chapter three of Chihuahua's history of extreme violence and how it enters Gardea's texts, in other words how far it has influenced the cultural and social imagination of the inhabitants of the region, could be expanded. Similarly, the limited anthropological research included in chapter five, and its attempt to link the spiritual world of Placeres to local soul beliefs and spiritual practices, could be strengthened by a more detailed study of the history of Chihuahuan soul beliefs.

Finally, further research is necessary to explore texts that this thesis has been unable to approach due to limitations of time and space, such as the novels *Soñar la guerra* (1984) and *Sóbol* (1985). More importantly, there is clearly a need to analyse Gardea's new fiction, which includes a short story collection *Difícil de atrapar* and his ninth novel *Juegan los comensales*. According to the author, these works no longer use the imaginary town Placeres as the location for their narratives, a spatial shift that first occurred in *El agua de las esferas*. Questions immediately arise from this shift: why has Gardea moved his texts to different sites? where will the new texts be located? how will the new sites differ from Placeres and what impact will they have upon Gardea's writing? how will the spatial dimensions of the new locations transform the actions of his characters and the dynamics of the narratives?

What remains however, as the most vital and challenging field of research to be continued on Gardea's work, is that which was alluded to at the beginning of this

conclusion - the need to move closer, to draw out and somehow touch upon the qualities of his writing that seem to evade many standard forms of interpretation: to enter Placeres, a fragile and unstable zone, generated by the simultaneity of psychic and material events; to share the inhabitants' experience of this psycho-geographic field, in which bodies, spirits, matter and psyches fold in upon each other. A non-symbolic and disturbing inter-world, that cannot be navigated by Freudian, Jungian, semiotic, or other popular forms of symbol manipulation. An unclassifiable field of intense and moving forces, in which, as Corbin puts it, 'spirits are embodied, and bodies spiritualized.'<sup>6</sup> Or as the Yaqui believed, 'a skin between worlds', a crack that 'opens and closes like a door in the wind.'<sup>7</sup> It is here that Gardea's texts continue to challenge and upset the security of familiar interpretative frameworks - at a liminal point running between psycho/spiritual and geophysical events, where spirit and matter create an inter-fold he calls Placeres.

This approach is radically different to explaining Gardea's work by referring to collections of data - it is not archival. Rather, it engages in what public records and historic documents cannot often supply - the new, the possible and the virtual. As the author puts it - 'Sí, le tengo alergia a la información. No me interesa gran cosa estar informado...La historia, como cosa para hacer literatura, no me interesa...todavía.'<sup>8</sup> It is the allure of that which is immediately 'present' in the texts (spirit-voices), but not accessible through conceptual labels or classifications - forces that can neither be qualified, nor pacified by metaphor. It is to recognize that Gardea has created 'a style that does spring from the local conditions, not of trees and mountains, but of the "soul"...' <sup>9</sup> It is to affirm his unique position in Mexican literature - his originality - that continues to go unrecognized, because as William Carlos Williams once said:

Invent that which is new, even if it be made of pine from  
your own yard, and there's none to know what you have  
done. It is because there's no name.<sup>10</sup>



Jesús Gardea. Ciudad Juárez, 1993.





## Notes

1. See David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas*, p.332.
2. Held, p.331.
3. Jacques Lacan, *The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious*.
4. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p.96.
5. William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain*, p.226.
6. Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, p.84.
7. Don Juan, quoted by Carlos Castaneda in *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, p.132.
8. Gardea, 'Novela e historia', p.50.
9. Williams, p.229.
10. Williams, p.228.



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